

Savoir Faire

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Savoir Faire

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Takes place 10 years before EP1 (seven months after "Saber Dance")
Action/Romance

Rated R Summary: Just another mission for Qui Gon and Obi Wan as they deal with rare jewels, pirates, kidnappers, and two lovesick sisters. (sequel to my story "Saber Dance")

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"I don't understand this," Obi Wan was saying, breaking into a jog every few steps to keep up with Qui Gon as he strode into the hangar and over towards the waiting cargo ship. "Is it possible we've become famous somehow?" he teased with a hint of a smile. "Why else would the owner of this vessel specifically request us by name to the Council for this mission when any Jedi would qualify? This will be simple compared to what we were originally assigned."

Qui Gon glanced back at his young apprentice. "Perhaps someone whom we helped once...recommended us. I honestly don't know. It is uncommon, but not unheard of. What I don't understand is why the council agreed to this person's request when we had already been assigned to Polovia. Then to go so far as to cancel that assignment at the last minute when they knew we had been preparing for it for two weeks and then assign it to another team."

Qui Gon stopped walking abruptly and faced Obi Wan, shaking his head in disbelief. Obi Wan took the opportunity to catch his breath. He drew up beside his master and merely nodded in agreement, letting Qui Gon rant. The Jedi Master's eyes were dark and his expression conveyed his irritation. "To protect and to serve people is one thing. To protect and serve their materialistic wealth is another." He turned suddenly and continued on to the waiting ship. "They don't need Jedi to guard a shipment of jewels. A security force from the Republic would suffice."

It was obvious to Obi Wan, his master was more than a little miffed. He could sense it and he also knew Qui Gon had a habit of lengthening his stride whenever he was upset. He glided effortlessly through the large hangar now, his dark robe billowing out behind him, snapping softly in the air with each sharp turn he made.

Though puzzled by this turn of events, Obi Wan didn't mind the last minute reassignment.

"Master, the Council did mention their plotted course would take them through an unsecured sector and the cargo of jewels could attract the attention of pirates. There has been reported activity there," Obi Wan relayed, trying to placate Qui Gon with the possibility of having to protect the crew and passengers.

"That's another thing," Qui Gon said, stopping again and facing Obi Wan. His apprentice almost ran into him. "What kind of navigator takes a ship full of precious jewels through an unsecured sector?"

Obi Wan drew in a long breath, shifted the bag he was carrying over to his other shoulder and fought a smile. "A naive one?"

Qui Gon put his hands on his hips. "We can only hope the rest of the crew isn't that inept."

Obi Wan couldn't remember the last time he had seen his master this incensed. "I'll take a look at the charts when we get on board. Maybe I can find a better route. Aurelia is where the jewels are going once we load them from Istse. That's where the mine is, but that system is still secured. So actually we will be going from one secured system to another. I believe it is around the planet Dorvan that we might run into trouble. There has to be a way around it."

Qui Gon turned and gazed at the cargo vessel looming before him. He nodded. "It's a small ship, few passengers, not very affluent looking. Maybe pirates won't consider it worthy of an attack."

Obi Wan smiled slightly. Qui Gon seemed more concerned now than angry, as he began regarding their mission in a new light. Defending passengers from danger was much more worthy of Jedi Knights than merely babysitting pretty rocks. Obi Wan remembered when they were back on Coruscant at the Temple, after just having been told of the sudden change of plans, Qui Gon had muttered something about wasting his time with this assignment. Needless to say, they had left the Council on less than cordial terms. Obi Wan trusted the Council, however, and knew there had to be a better reason to assign them here besides public relations. The threat of piracy might be more imminent than first suspected by either Jedi.

Walking side by side now, at a much more reasonable pace, Qui Gon and Obi Wan started up the boarding ramp and entered the ship. The pilot was waiting with a protocol droid. He smiled broadly as they approached.

"Ah, welcome aboard the Decipher, distinguished Jedi envoy," the pilot greeted. "As I'm sure you know, this ship is owned by the Alcor Crystal Company." He gestured grandly about him. "All of us on board here are employees of Orman Gemstone, a division of the Alcor Company. I am your captain, Rolak Fostey. This is HJK-260. We are very pleased your council has allowed you to grace us with your presence. The shipment of uncut star allees we are about to receive is the largest and finest our mines have produced. It is very reassuring to us to know you are here to assist us in seeing these gems reach Aurelia safely."

Obi Wan could feel Qui Gon bristle beside him. His master took a deep steadying breath and gestured at Obi Wan. "This is Obi Wan Kenobi. I am Qui Gon Jinn. We are here to see that you and the other crew members and passengers reach Aurelia safely, not the gems. Since we are here, and might I add under duress, I want it made clear that I will not be putting my apprentice or myself in harm's way for the sake of cargo, no matter how large or fine it may be, or how vital to the financial security of your company--"

"Orman Gemstone," Captain Fostey supplied.

"--Orman Gemstone," Qui Gon finished.

Captain Fostey gave his droid a wary look. "As you wish, Master Jinn. Though ensuring the safety of one will inevitably ensure the safety of the other." He bowed slightly. "We place our ensured safety in your hands."

Defused once more, Qui Gon returned the bow. "Thank you Captain. Now if you'll excuse us momentarily, perhaps HJK could show us to our quarters? Then, my apprentice would like to have a look at your navigational charts. We would also require...Did you say Orman?"

Captain Fostey nodded. He didn't understand the two Jedis' suddenly shocked frozen expressions.

"Orman," Obi Wan repeated with a barely contained smile. "Master, I think I know why we were specifically requested for this mission."

Qui Gon closed his eyes and passed his large hand over them in exasperation. When he spoke, his voice was strangely subdued. "Captain, by chance do you happen to have a listing of your crew and passengers?"

The captain nodded at HJK-260 and the droid stalked off to the bridge, returning with a small data pad in his hand. He handed it to Captain Fostey who in turn, gave it to Qui Gon.

Qui Gon took it, glanced at it and handed it quickly back. Obi Wan looked over at him questioningly, but Qui Gon ignored him.

"We will be leaving shortly. Please ready yourselves for departure," Captain Fostey told the Jedi then spoke quietly to HJK. The protocol droid suddenly stepped forward.

"This way sirs." The droid started off. Qui Gon and Obi Wan bowed once more, then turned and followed HJK.

Obi Wan couldn't wait any longer. He locked his eyes on his master, grinning wildly.

"Well? Are they here?"

Qui Gon sighed heavily then nodded. Inside, his heart twitched.

Mandie Orman crossed the room to answer the soft metallic knock on the door of her quarters. She glanced back at the handsome young man seated in a chair by the door that adjoined her stepsister's room.

"Excuse me, Corbin," she addressed him politely. He merely smiled and shrugged, content to remain where he was.

Mandie opened the door. The droid HJK-260 stood there, facing the other direction. When he heard the door open, he turned. "Pardon me, Miss Orman," HJ began. "I was told to notify Miss Tia when the Jedi had arrived. I am unable to locate her. Would you, by any chance, know of her whereabouts?"

Mandie's heart began racing. She shook her head quickly. "Ah...No. I don't. Sorry. But I can tell her if I see her." Suddenly all she could think of was 'he's here, right now, right this very second....'

"Very well, Miss, but be sure to inform her. She was most emphatic about knowing the minute they arrived," HJ went on.

"Where...where are they now?" Mandie asked, her mouth feeling curiously dry.

"I have just shown them to their quarters on B deck. I am to return there shortly to take Jedi Kenobi to the bridge."

Jedi Kenobi, Mandie repeated savoringly in her mind. She sighed softly and licked her lips unconsciously. "Thank you HJ. I promise if I see Tia, I'll tell her Obi Wan is here. Um...I mean the Jedi." HJ bowed and stalked off. Mandie closed the door.

Her mind was spinning. It had been so long since she had last seen him. My first kiss, she thought. When they had parted seven months ago, she was certain she would never get to see him again, but her memories of the special evening they shared on the terrace had always kept him close to her heart and her feelings for him had deepened. To the point where Corbin, her current boyfriend, was not measuring up.

"I don't understand why we have to have Jedi on board," Corbin muttered, interrupting Mandie's thoughts. "We've never had Jedi on

our cargo ships before."

Mandie turned to face him. In truth, she had forgotten he was still sitting there. "This is an important shipment, Corbin. And without a real navigator or a first officer, Tia thought the Jedi could help us out."

"You could have easily hired a navigator or pulled a first officer from another ship. I understand your sister had to pull quite a few strings to get these 'wizards' here in the first place. And what exactly are they good for anyway? They're creepy if you ask me."

Mandie walked over to him, struggling to control her rising irritation. "They are not. They are quite clever actually and very skilled warriors." She looked down at him and frowned. He gazed back at her with deep set dark eyes. Like all Aurelians, Corbin had long hair and sharp attractive features. Looking at him now, Mandie could understand what had attracted her to him in the beginning. If only his personality matched his dark good looks. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were jealous."

Corbin reached up and took Mandie's hand. "Damn right I'm jealous. You don't have to defend them so wholeheartedly, I might just get the idea that you are intrigued by them. Maybe one of them has already cast a spell on you, hmm?" He tried to pull Mandie onto his lap but she resisted. He frowned. "Look, I take it back. It's just that you're my girl, and I know how these mysterious types tend to attract you."

Mandie smiled slightly. "You're not mysterious, and I was attracted to you," she soothed, but was careful to use the past tense. She let him pull her down to his lap and put his arms around her. The last thing she wanted was for him to start any trouble because he felt jealous. She knew, as a salesman, Corbin had a vested interest in the shipment, but she wished he hadn't insisted on coming along. Their relationship was getting sour fast and he refused to notice her lack of interest. And when Mandie had found out Tia had managed to enlist the aid of two familiar Jedi, Mandie would have done anything to keep Corbin away.

"That's better," he whispered in her ear. He kissed her cheek. "If I catch one of those Jedi even looking at you..."

Mandie rolled her eyes.

Once the ship had gone into hyperspace and Obi Wan had left for the bridge, Qui Gon began to walk slowly through the ship's interior, familiarizing himself with the layout and location of different facilities. He made his way to the empty cargo hold and inspected it, telling himself it was important to see that everything was in good working order. Deep down inside, he knew he was searching the ship for a different reason.

He made his way back onto the upper decks, gliding soundlessly through each hall, passing each door with a new sense of purpose. He stretched out with the Force, heightening his senses, wondering if he would even remember the feeling of her presence. It had been a long

time since he had last felt it.

His thoughts drifted back despite his best effort to keep them at bay. He remembered the way she felt in his arms, the way she moved with him as they danced, and the way she seemed to absorb him into herself as he kissed her. Her parting words were a promise never to forget him. His very presence here was proof that she had kept her promise.

He hadn't forgotten her either. Her presence occurred to him faintly at first, but with assured familiarity. She was coming towards him, but he could not see her yet. He stopped walking and waited in quiet anticipation.

She turned the corner and stopped cold when she spied him. Her large gray eyes shined and a slow smile crept over her face. She sighed deeply and moved towards him.

"Qui Gon Jinn, my, my, my. You're even more handsome than I remembered." She stopped directly in front of him, her eyes sweeping down the length of him admiringly.

Qui Gon smiled easily. "Hello Tia." She looked just as beautiful now in her simple uniform as she had in the formal gown at the reception so many months ago.

She sighed again. "Oh and that voice. How many times in these past seven months I longed to hear you say my name." She reached up tentatively and touched his hair. "How did you know I was on board? You must have arrived just before we took off." She frowned suddenly. "Useless droid, I can't trust him to follow a simple request," she muttered more to herself than Qui Gon.

"Captain Fostey happened to mention Orman Gemstone. Then I asked for a list of passengers."

Tia looked disappointed. "Damn, I wanted to surprise you."

Qui Gon laughed. "If it's any consolation, I was quite surprised. And even more surprised to see your name listed as a crew member."

"Yes, well," Tia shrugged. "We lost two officers to another shipping line at the last minute and I had to step in as navigator for this trip."

Qui Gon's brow furrowed. "You're our navigator?" He shook his head. That explained a lot. "Have you ever navigated prior to this?"

Tia gazed up at him innocently. "Well, no, but I'm studying to be a navigator. So I do know more than an ordinary civilian."

"Did you realize you had plotted a course through an unsecured sector? A sector that has reported pirate activity?" Qui Gon inquired. Tia smiled, looking at him as if he were actually whispering sweet nothings in her ear instead of criticizing her capabilities as a navigator. Qui Gon sighed, feeling himself being drawn closer to her, his eyes locked on hers. It seemed she was even more beautiful than he remembered. Valiantly trying to stay focused on their current navigating problem, he turned away from her and

began walking slowly down the hall. "I hope you won't be too insulted then if I have Obi Wan plot a new route for us," he continued. "He's on the bridge now, going over the charts. If there's a better route, he'll find it."

Tia came up beside him. "Well good luck to him, then."

Qui Gon was surprised by her reply. "Why do you say that?"

"Simply because, there is no other way to go. I plotted the most straightforward route I could. From here to Istse, to Dorvan, to Aurelia."

"Dorvan? But we're not going to Dorvan. Dorvan should be avoided at all costs."

Tia shook her head. "We have to go to Dorvan. We have to take Corbin Roos there."

Qui Gon stopped walking and faced her. "Who is Corbin Roos and why do we have to risk being attacked by pirates to take him to Dorvan?"

"Corbin is one of our rising young salesmen. He insisted we go to Dorvan so he could take some samples to the palace in the capital city. He's hoping to spark enough interest in the star allees to establish a name for us there. As far as we know, no other gemstone dealers cater to that sector. It could mean a lot of revenue for us," Tia explained.

But Qui Gon was already shaking his head. "Absolutely not," he stated emphatically. "If he wants to play door-to-door salesman in pirate-infested quadrants, he can do it with a ship that is not under my protection. It's too dangerous to venture near Dorvan, and that's not a good enough reason to risk our lives."

Tia opened her mouth to protest, but then smiled instead. "Ooo, I love that commanding tone of yours," she teased. She sidled up to him and slipped her arms around his waist. "I get to see a whole other side of you here. I knew requesting the help of the Jedi would spice things up a bit."

Qui Gon gazed down at her, fighting a smile. "I'm not here to 'spice' anything up," he replied. "My presence here was specifically requested by a certain person or persons that for the time being shall remain nameless, to see to the safety and well being of this vessel and that is exactly what I intend to do." He slowly wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her tightly against him.

"That certain nameless person is very grateful for your presence," Tia replied. She gazed longingly at him. "I missed you," she whispered suddenly. "That's why I asked the council specifically for you. But we also needed help. We needed protection. The cargo is valuable and we knew things could go wrong. My father asked me to personally oversee this shipment. And more importantly, Mandie is with me. I knew this trip might be risky but she goes where I go. We were supposed to get a security guard or two from Istse to accompany us to Dorvan and Aurelia, but I wanted more. I wanted us to feel absolutely safe and in capable hands. I wanted Jedi."

Qui Gon sighed. He lowered his head. Tia parted her lips invitingly, her eyes closing slowly drawing him closer and closer until his mouth was on hers, kissing her with tantalizing thoroughness. It felt as right and as sweetly satisfying as the last kiss they had shared on a dance floor many months before. That time between them seemed to disappear as if it never existed.

Mandie walked determinedly towards the bridge. She couldn't wait any longer. She wanted to see Obi Wan. Unfortunately, Corbin insisted on going with her. She tried to tell herself it was better to see him with Corbin along, than to not see him at all. She turned and looked back at her boyfriend.

"I'll only be a minute. I just want to welcome him on board," she explained. "HJ said he was on the bridge so he must be busy doing something. I'm sure he won't really have time to talk to me. Can't you just wait for me back in the room? When I get back, we'll go get something to eat, okay?" She thought it was worth one last try to ditch him.

"Maybe I'd like to welcome him on board myself," Corbin replied.

"Fine," Mandie said and sighed heavily. Maybe it won't be so bad having Corbin meet him. Maybe she was expecting too much anyway. Maybe Obi Wan wouldn't care that she had a boyfriend now. Maybe he wouldn't even remember her.

She paused before opening the door to the bridge and took a deep breath.

"Why do you seem nervous?" Corbin asked taunting her.

Mandie glared at him and opened the door and ran right into Obi Wan who was apparently on his way out. He caught her, steadying her with his hands on her shoulders. He smiled, then laughed.

"Mandie!" he greeted, his hands still resting on her arms. "Funny how we keep running into each other. Literally!"

Mandie smiled back at him, drinking in the sight of him with her eyes, trying to ignore Corbin's irritated glare. "Hello...so we meet again," she responded. She wished she could just throw her arms around him and cover his face with kisses.

"Seems you two have met before," Corbin said flatly. "I take it this is one of the Jedi." He stepped forward and scrutinized Obi Wan.

Obi Wan stepped back and gave Mandie a questioning look. Mandie sighed. "Obi Wan, this is Corbin Roos. Corbin, this is Obi Wan Kenobi. Yes, he's one of the Jedi."

"Pleased to meet you," Obi Wan said and extended his hand to Corbin who purposefully ignored it and instead put his arm possessively around Mandie. To make matters worse, Corbin forced a laugh and shook his head.

"This is our all-powerful Jedi Knight? This is our protection? He's just a boy!"

Obi Wan shifted his weight to one hip and folded his arms across his chest. He raised his brow. "I'm almost seventeen. And I'm apprenticed to a Jedi Master. I am not a Knight...yet." He couldn't understand the open hostility he was sensing in Corbin, who couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than he was. He had only just met him and had done nothing to provoke such feelings, but then he took in the way Corbin was holding Mandie and began to understand. He sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Apprentice Obi Wan," Corbin continued. "I guess from what I had heard about you Jedi I rather expected some noble, statuesque being who commands by mere presence."

"Apparently you haven't met Qui Gon," Obi Wan said in a quietly measured tone. He faced Mandie again and smiled slightly. "It was nice to see you again. But if you'll excuse me, there's something I need to do." He slipped past them and hurried away.

Mandie sighed in frustration. "That was rude," she said, her face flushing with anger. She jerked herself free from Corbin's grasp and pointed her finger threateningly at him. "I'm going to find him and apologize for you. Don't follow me! And you can forget about having dinner with me tonight! I can't believe I ever liked you!" She turned on her heel and strode down the hall.

Corbin sighed and swore under his breath, slamming his fist into the wall.

Obi Wan needed to find the ship's navigator. He couldn't change their coordinates without the system's codes and he also wanted to find Qui Gon and go over the new course he had plotted before actually entering it into the ship's computer.

Once he felt he was far enough away from the bridge, he slowed his pace and bowed his head, trying hard not to let his rising anger and humiliation get the better of him. He tried to clear his mind, gathering the Force around him like a protective blanket, focusing on its calming and reassuring presence to heal his slightly wounded pride.

He stopped walking and leaned against the wall, pulling himself deeper into the Force, letting it fill him completely. He closed his eyes, meditating on its serenity.

Vaguely, he heard footsteps approaching. The sound seemed distant, but the lifeforce he felt was actually standing right in front of him. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes.

Mandie was staring at him, shaking her head. "I'm really sorry for what happened back there," she said. "I don't know what came over him."

"I do," Obi Wan said plainly. "He was feeling inferior. He needed to find some way to make himself appear better than me and more appealing to you." He sighed and locked eyes with her. "Is he your

boyfriend?"

Mandie hated to admit it at this point, but nodded slowly.

Obi Wan could feel how upset Mandie was and it helped a little knowing it was for his sake. "It's all right. Really." He offered her a small smile. Mandie smiled back. "Since he likes you, I know he at least has good taste." Now Mandie laughed. Obi Wan remembered what a pretty laugh she had. He was glad he was able to make her laugh now. She seemed so depressed and miserable before.

Mandie took a deep breath. "I don't want to be with him anymore. Sometimes he can be really sweet and other times a total jerk. He joined the company a few months ago as a salesman. That's how I met him. I was the one who trained him. Working together like that, we got to know each other really well and started making a point of seeing each other outside of work."

Obi Wan shook his head. "There's no need to explain, Mandie. It's not like we were ever committed to each other. Just because I kissed you, doesn't mean I have any claim to you."

Mandie looked back at him unhappily. "I know. I know." She bowed her head to study her hands that were fitfully twisting her shirt tails. "I don't know how I ended up with someone like Corbin. Maybe it's because he is the only other guy who has ever shown any interest in me besides you." And I know I can't have you. Even though you're the one I really want, she thought to herself.

Obi Wan sighed, reaching for her. She readily went to him, settling herself against his chest as he folded his arms around her. She lay her head on his neck and he leaned his head upon hers, closing his eyes. "I'm sorry you're unhappy. Is there anything I can do?"

"I could use a hug," she replied, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

Obi Wan smiled and hugged her gently, nuzzling her hair, enjoying the warm feeling of her in his arms. He began rocking her soothingly, pleased that she felt so comfortable with him still. It was as if they had picked up right where they had left off.

"Ah Miss Tia! There you are!" HJK-260 hailed as he spied Tia and Qui Gon walking towards him down the hall.

Tia frowned at the droid. "HJ where have you been? You were supposed to let me know when the Jedi arrived on board," she reprimanded.

The droid didn't understand why she was still unaware of this fact when she was walking right beside one of them. "Pardon me, Miss Tia, but haven't you noticed you are in the company of one of the Jedi at this very moment?"

"Yea, very funny HJ. Look, we have to find Mandie and Corbin, have you seen them? Neither one is in the room. We have to tell Corbin we won't be going to Dorvan after all."

"They were in their room the last time I saw them, Miss Tia. Oh, but that was some time ago, I'm afraid," HJ replied. "Shall I search for them now?"

Tia nodded. "If you find them, just tell Corbin I need to talk to him. We'll be on the bridge."

"Yes Mistress, I shall find them, don't you worry!" HJ assured and hurried off in the opposite direction.

Tia smiled and shook her head. "The galaxy's most unreliable droid, but he is a sweetheart and he does try."

Qui Gon grinned. "I could ask Obi Wan to rewire him for you. He'll be of better service no doubt but he'll lose that rustic charm."

"No thank you. I prefer him just the way he is," Tia said. "Speaking of Obi Wan, I'll need to give him the codes if he is going to take over navigating. Where is he?"

"He should still be on the bridge," Qui Gon told her but the closer they got to it, the more certain he was that his apprentice was not there. He stopped walking and turned around. "No, he's not here. I'll check our room. If he shows up after I'm gone, tell him to stay put until I get back here."

Tia nodded. "Anything..." she teased, reminding him of his own answer to her request for a favor back on the dance floor of the reception hall. She smiled up at him coyly and slipped inside the door to the bridge.

Qui Gon inhaled slowly and shook his head.

Mandie was ready to break up with Corbin. After seeing Obi Wan again, she knew her relationship with Corbin would never be right. It never had been right. In the short time she had spent with Obi Wan on this ship, he had shown her more compassion and tenderness than Corbin ever had. It was this new resolute attitude that enabled her to walk hand in hand with the handsome young Jedi towards the bridge. If Corbin saw her, she didn't care. She just hoped he wouldn't do anything stupid, like challenge Obi Wan to a duel or something over her. She didn't like Corbin anymore, but she didn't want to see him maimed or killed either.

Tia looked up as Mandie and Obi Wan entered the bridge. Obi Wan sighed in visible relief and walked over to the terminal where Tia sat.

"Hello again, Miss Orman," he greeted with a sweet smile. "Mandie and I have been looking for you. I have a new course ready to go, but I can't enter it in the ship's computer without your codes." He paused and frowned suddenly. "Have you seen Qui Gon? Mandie told me you were our navigator and she explained why we were going to Aurelia via Dorvan, but I don't know if Qui Gon knows this yet."

"Yes and yes," Tia smiled getting up and motioning Obi Wan to take her place. He slid into her vacated chair to begin reprogramming their coordinates. She handed him a data pad with the codes listed on it.

He accepted it with a grateful smile. "I did speak with Qui Gon and he knows I'm the navigator for this trip. We have already discussed everything and decided it would be best not to go to Dorvan. Not this time anyway." She faced Mandie. "Tell Corbin I'm sorry, but it's just too risky and this shipment of star allees is too valuable. It's best to just take them straight to Aurelia."

"I'm not speaking to Corbin at the moment," Mandie mumbled.

Tia tried to look distraught by the news. "What's this? Trouble in paradise? Or did you finally come to your senses and realize the likes of Corbin Roos can't possibly compete with this fine specimen of Jedi here?" She ruffled Obi Wan's hair and made him blush adorably. She grinned mischievously and reached over and pinched Mandie's cheek affectionately.

Now Mandie blushed. She would give anything to have her sister's confidence. "No, it's not like that. He's inexcusably rude and downright nasty at times. I don't want to be with anyone who's like that."

Tia gave Mandie a reassuring hug. "Well, good for you, Sweetie. I couldn't tell you this before but I never really liked Corbin. The man had no finesse."

Mandie smiled and shrugged. Her eyes drifted over to Obi Wan and he turned his head to face her and leaned back in his chair. Captain Fostey came over and gestured at the terminal screen.

"The new coordinates?" he asked.

Obi Wan nodded but his eyes never left Mandie. "Almost ready," he said.

"We're about to cut to sublight engines. We'll be coming up on Istse soon. I'll need the new course in the system before we take off again," Captain Fostey told him.

Obi Wan pried his eyes off of Mandie and faced the captain. "That won't be a problem." He turned back around and continued to enter the codes.

Tia noticed the way Mandie was watching the young Jedi. Something was going on between those two, she could tell. She had been teasing Mandie before, but she really hoped her little sister hadn't decided to break up with Corbin for Obi Wan. She made a mental note to talk to her later about the nature of the Jedi. Jedi were not the type of men you should fall in love with. Now if she explained this to Mandie and repeated it enough times, maybe she would begin to believe it herself.

Corbin Roos stalked angrily down the hall to his cabin. He hurried inside and went to the large chest at the foot of the bed and fished through the contents haphazardly. When he found what he wanted he carried it back to the bed and turned it on. The device began making a soft purring sound and on the side of it a red light blinked slowly. Once satisfied it was in good working order, he slipped the device under the bed and pushed it up against the wall.

He reached into the chest again and pulled out a tiny comlink. Activating this, he spoke quickly and quietly.

"The tracking mechanism has been activated. Our plan will be carried out as scheduled. We are coming up on Istse now and will have the jewels on board by 21:00 your time. Use the beacon to find the ship. Prepare to board as scheduled."

"Copy," a static filled voice responded. "Do your part as planned and this will be an easy take. Over."

Corbin smiled and adjusted the tone on the comlink. "No problem there," he said. "I've seen their security." He walked arrogantly over to his bed and stretched out. "Like you said, an easy take. Over and out."

Mandie was staring out of the main viewscreen on the bridge. The planet Istse was growing steadily larger and larger.

Obi Wan had just finished entering all the codes and altering their coordinates for the remainder of their journey and was leaning back in his chair taking a moment to study Istse as well.

The planet was blue and green with swirls of violet clouds mottling the atmosphere. It didn't look like the other mining planets that Obi Wan was familiar with, which always seemed so lifeless and colorless to him. This planet looked rich and vibrant. He turned to face Tia.

"Will we be going directly to the mines to get the shipment?" He was rather hoping to, so he could get a first hand look at the operation, but Tia shook her head.

"No. Everything is packed up and ready, awaiting our arrival on the port. Once we dock, we'll have a couple of hours off the ship while the gems are loaded and secured." She smiled warmly. "We should all go into town. Consider it shore leave. You and Mandie could go out to dinner and then visit the mines. Our mines are the finest in the galaxy. We have highly skilled miners working for us. It's incredible to watch them. Just by looking at a formation of rock, they can tell where the allees are. That's why they are also the most highly paid miners. Without them, we wouldn't have access to our gems and we know that. Our company takes care to show our appreciation. Going there would be very educational for you. Only be back here by the time we are ready to take off. I don't have a problem with that."

Mandie glanced back at Obi Wan and smiled. "That would be fun."

Obi Wan returned her smile but shook his head. "I don't know. Qui Gon might have a problem with that. I'm sure he'll want us to oversee the loading to make sure everything is properly secured."

Tia frowned. She dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. "Don't you worry about Qui Gon. I'll take care of him."

"Problem with what?" the Jedi Master said as he strolled onto the bridge. Everyone turned to face him. His eyes swept around the bridge

but no one answered him. He went to the viewscreen and stood beside Mandie. She looked up at him and offered him a shy smile. Qui Gon extended his hand. "You must be Mandie Orman." She nodded, still staring up at him. Her small hand all but disappeared in his. "I'm Qui Gon Jinn. I'm very pleased to meet you," he told her with a gentle smile. He paused, gazing steadily at her for a moment or two, then said, "And thank you, I'm very flattered that you think so." His smile increased two-fold as Mandie's eyes grew as wide as saucers and her jaw dropped in surprise. Her face turned bright red as she looked away from him.

"How did you know what I was thinking?" she whispered, her eyes plastered to the floor.

He leaned closer to her. "It was more a feeling accompanied by a thought. You were projecting it very clearly."

Tia was smiling, shaking her head. "I guess I should have warned you, Mandie. You have to watch what you think around these guys."

Qui Gon caught Obi Wan's admonishing expression and faced Mandie again. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's just that I found your... 'appreciation' of me charming."

Mandie peered up at him and smiled. "You're welcome," she said quietly.

Qui Gon straightened and turned, stepping away from the viewscreen and over to Obi Wan. He peered down at the coordinates for the newly plotted route and nodded, placing his hand on Obi Wan's shoulder, conveying his approval.

"Now," he began, "What was it that I was supposed to have a problem with?" he repeated, resuming his authoritative down-to-business air.

Tia stepped forward. "We'll have some time on the planet surface while they load the cargo hold. I suggest we go into town and get something to eat besides cafeteria food and stretch our legs, what do you think?"

Qui Gon turned around to face her and leaned his hips casually on the console. "Why would I have a problem with that? You are free to go wherever you wish."

Tia squirmed slightly. "We wanted you and Obi Wan to come too."

"Our place is here with the ship," he replied without hesitation. He could feel his apprentice's disappointment, though Obi Wan's expression remained completely passive.

"Oh Qui Gon! Nothing is going to happen while they load the jewels and it will only be for a couple of hours. The jewels will be guarded by an armed security force while they are being loaded. Captain Fostey and HJ can supervise the loading. Please say yes?" Tia stepped over to him and subtly positioned herself directly in front of him, carefully pinning him against the console by straddling his left leg. She could look right into his eyes now without having to look up. She

smiled slowly, her thighs almost touching his.

Qui Gon froze. Even though she wasn't actually touching him, just having her so close to him and in such a provocative position was making his mouth dry and his pulse race. He didn't dare move, but locked his eyes on hers, mentally cursing himself for letting her affect him this way. He took a deep breath to clear his muddled thoughts.

Obi Wan tactfully avoided watching this war of wills being played out to his left and cleared his throat. "Master, perhaps it would not be such a good idea for them to go off unescorted. You said yourself our first priority is to the safety of the passengers and crew, not to the cargo."

Qui Gon shot his apprentice a look of chagrin. The boy was right, as usual. Qui Gon sighed heavily, and began nodding slowly. "Very well," he conceded. He faced Tia. "If you insist on venturing off on your own, we do have an obligation to escort you," he told her through slightly clenched teeth.

Tia smiled triumphantly and stepped back, releasing her prisoner finally, rubbing her hands together in anticipation. "Good! It's all settled then."

Qui Gon quickly stood up and moved away from the console and Tia. He took advantage of his regained freedom to reestablish his authority.

"But one of us should stay with the ship," he said, fixing his eyes on Obi Wan. He could feel the collective sinking of hearts around him and suddenly felt like the most despised villain in the galaxy.

Obi Wan swallowed hard and faced his master. He nodded slowly. "I'll stay," he said quietly.

Tia walked over to Qui Gon and glared angrily at him. "How could you do such a thing? Let him come too."

Qui Gon straightened to his full height and put his hands on his hips, his dark blue eyes glimmering a perceptible warning. Obi Wan recognized that look and quickly interceded.

"It's all right, Miss Orman. We are here on assignment and Qui Gon is in a sense responsible for your cargo as well as the safety of all on board. He's right, one of us needs to stay here. That way, I can relay to him any details or complications I notice while he is away." Obi Wan held his breath as Tia and Qui Gon continued to glare at each other. He was infinitely relieved when Tia backed down this time.

"Oh all right," she said, not bothering to disguise her disapproval. She gestured at Mandie. "We'll be landing soon. Let's go get ready."

Mandie reluctantly started off towards her sister, looking longingly at the young Jedi still seated at the console. Tia took her hand and pulled her to her and hurried her off the bridge.

Qui Gon dropped into the chair next to Obi Wan. He closed his eyes,

summoning every calming exercise he could think of to steady his screaming nerves.

Obi Wan glanced at him, trying hard not to smile.

"Thank you, Padawan," Qui Gon said suddenly and sincerely. He opened his eyes slowly and faced his apprentice.

"For what?" Obi Wan asked, trying to sound as clueless as possible. He had his master in a rare moment of obligation and he figured he might as well get everything he could out of it.

Qui Gon sighed, knowing exactly what his apprentice wanted of him. "For not questioning my decision. For volunteering to stay." He paused, a slow smile lighting his face. "For coming to my rescue twice. For sparing me the humiliation I would have undoubtedly brought on myself by choosing to confront Miss Orman." He reached over and squeezed Obi Wan's shoulder. "I couldn't have hoped for a wiser padawan. You showed great diplomacy just now. I'm very proud of you."

Obi Wan beamed. "Thank you Master."

Qui Gon leaned back in his chair. He looked drained. "That woman," he muttered. "Pulls my better judgement right down a black hole." He glanced at Obi Wan, shaking his head ruefully. "Women can be the most persuasive creatures, Obi Wan. You'll find yourself powerless to resist them at times. All your defenses are useless against their arsenal of weaponry."

Obi Wan laughed. "Take heart, Master. After Miss Orman, any pirates we come up against will be a breeze."

Qui Gon smiled. "Bring on the pirates!"

Mandie was grateful to find her room empty when she arrived. She wasn't ready to face Corbin yet. She went over to the adjoining door that allowed her access into Tia's room and opened it. Her step sister was trying to change her clothes, muttering angrily, and cursing under her breath. Mandie smiled, leaning against the doorframe.

"...Stubborn, arrogant, heartless, dense..." she was saying. She spied Mandie and waved her inside. "How could he?" she continued. "He's just plain mean." She noticed Mandie wasn't bothering to change. "You're not going to wear that are you?"

Mandie shrugged. "I really don't feel like going out, Tia. I think I'll stay on the ship."

Tia smiled at her knowingly. "I understand." She tossed her uniform onto her bed and pulled a dress from her wardrobe and slipped into it, wrapping it around herself and tightening the belt. "If Qui Gon wasn't so hard on Obi Wan, we could have had a lot of fun going out together, but I'm sure Obi Wan won't mind having to watch the ship as much if you stay with him."

"Qui Gon's only looking out for us," Mandie offered. "Don't be angry

with him."

Tia sighed. "Oh, I'm not really. Besides, all he would have to do is smile at me and all would be forgiven. Of course, I can't let him know that."

Mandie nodded. "Gosh, you never told me how good-looking he was." She giggled suddenly. "That was what I was thinking when I first saw him. He said he felt it. I was so embarrassed, but I'm glad he thought I was charming. I think he's pretty charming himself. No wonder you were in a daze for weeks after that reception."

Tia sighed. "Was I? I don't remember." She suddenly laughed. "Hey, Obi Wan isn't very hard on the eyes either. I'd swear he's grown some since we last saw him. The uniform he was wearing then didn't do him any justice. He looks much better in that loose tunic. He's got a great neck. It was a shame to hide it."

Mandie grinned. "Yea, you're right." She grinned even more, remembering how she had laid her head on his neck when he hugged her. His skin was so warm and soft against her cheek and the hair on his chest had tickled her nose. She sighed wistfully.

Tia caught Mandie's dreamy expresssion and finished dressing, checking her hair quickly in her mirror. Then she turned to face Mandie. Perhaps now would be a good time to have that discussion concerning Jedi. "So, what's going on with you and that comely Mr. Kenobi?"

"Are you asking me if I like him?"

Tia put her hands on her hips. "Well do you?"

"Yea, I like him alot." Mandie eyed her sister warily. "So?"

Tia frowned. "So, just make sure it stays that way. For goodness sake, don't go falling in love with him or ask him for any kind of commitment. He's a Jedi, Mandie. Remember that. These guys are already committed--to being Jedi. They can't commit to a relationship, so it's best to not even try to start one. Stay friends, have fun with him if he's willing, but please, please, don't fall in love, okay?"

Mandie lowered her head and studied the floor. "Okay," she sighed. Her heart felt very heavy suddenly.

Tia reached over and gave her little sister a hug. "Well, I'm off. If you see Corbin, try to explain to him about Dorvan, okay? Tell him, he can go there once we reach Aurelia. At least we won't have to worry about the star allees this way."

Mandie nodded reluctantly. "I suppose someone needs to tell him soon."

"He'll be disappointed, but I'm sure he'll understand. Tell him the Jedi insisted we avoid Dorvan at all costs. There's nothing we can do about it."

Mandie frowned. "Oh, yea, that will go over well with him. I'm sure he'll understand," she said sarcastically. "He was really mad that

the Jedi were even on board. I have never seen him so angry. You would have thought he would have welcomed the extra security but he was...furious when he found out you had contacted the Jedi Council for their help."

Tia shrugged. "That is strange. But I wouldn't worry about it too much. After all, we are talking about Corbin here." She smiled and waved. "Well, I'll see you tonight. Have fun."

"You too," Mandie said as Tia hurried out the door.

Obi Wan found a suitable perch outside the ship's cargo hold on a platform of crates covered by a tarp and made himself comfortable. From where he sat, he could watch the ship being loaded and had a good view of the entire port. He studied the personnel loading the jewels and the faces of the guards so he would be able to sort out anyone later he didn't recognize. He noted all the entrances to the port, as well as blind spots and possible trouble spots that had the least security. All in all the port was impressively well maintained and the security was tight. Not very surprising really, considering the planet's main export was rare uncut gemstones.

Qui Gon came up beside him and sighed. He looked as though he would rather be the one watching the shipment being loaded than the one escorting two beautiful women out to dinner. He made a sweeping gesture, taking in the well-organized and highly guarded activity around them.

"All this for jewels," he said quietly. "Not food or bacta or anything necessary. Just jewels."

"It's enterprise," Obi Wan responded solemnly. "It's how the Republic functions." He shifted slightly to face his master. "At least it hasn't been established with slave labor."

Qui Gon looked over at Obi Wan, his heart twisting at the boy's words. Obi Wan had been enslaved himself once on an offshore mining operation on the planet Bandomeer when he was only twelve. Long after the nightmares stopped, an occasional memory still surfaced to haunt him.

Obi Wan continued. "Miss Orman told me they are the most highly paid miners in the galaxy. She spoke of them like they were actually skilled craftsmen. It was nice to hear the owner of such a lucrative business speak so highly of the workforce."

Qui Gon smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure it was. And that's nice to know." He folded his arms across his chest, burying his hands in the voluminous sleeves of his cloak. "This is quite a shipment. I didn't realize it would be as substantial as it is. Piracy could certainly put a dent in their revenue."

"There is really no reason now to suspect an attack," Obi Wan told him. "We'll be well out of range of any pirates lurking in the unsecured sector. The route to Aurelia should be uneventful."

Qui Gon spied someone coming down the boarding ramp of the ship. "Who's this?"

Obi Wan frowned. "That's Corbin Roos."

Qui Gon looked over at Obi Wan. "You say that in such a way as to lead me to believe you have met him but didn't exactly care for the man."

Obi Wan nodded. "To put it nicely, yes, you could say that." Obi Wan leaned towards Qui Gon and lowered his voice. "He's doesn't care for us either, let me warn you."

Qui Gon merely smiled. "I wonder if he is aware of our change in plans." He watched Corbin stop at the bottom of the boarding ramp and look around. Corbin spied the two Jedi and started towards them. Obi Wan moaned.

"You there," Corbin hailed. "How dare you?!"

Qui Gon sighed and stepped forward slightly. Obi Wan was grateful. He didn't want to have to deal with the likes of Corbin again.

"Is there a problem, Young Man?" Qui Gon asked innocently. He knew very well Corbin had to be referring to the altered coordinates.

"You're damn right there is!" Corbin snapped. He strode quickly up to the Jedi Master, challengingly, but was put off momentarily by Qui Gon's stature and build. To recover, he shot a disgusted look at Obi Wan. "You authorized the navigational change, didn't you? That's what you were doing on the bridge. Captain Fostey just informed me. It was nice of someone to. It would have been nicer if someone had consulted me on this before." Corbin was so angry, his face was turning red and the veins on his forehead were sticking out.

Qui Gon very subtly moved to stand in between his apprentice and the irate man. "There was no need to consult you. We very simply analyzed the situation, came to the correct conclusion and acted upon it."

"Without my approval!" Corbin shot back.

Qui Gon exchanged looks with Obi Wan. "We had the approval of the owner of this vessel the moment we were assigned to this mission and we had the immediate approval of the acting navigator, even though we did not need either to do what we did and we will continue to do what we deem necessary to ensure the safety of this ship and all on board."

Corbin was livid. He shook with barely controlled rage. He looked Qui Gon up and down a few times as if assessing his chances of surviving a confrontation, then turned with a growl and stalked off.

Qui Gon shrugged. Obi Wan stifled a laugh. Noble, statuesque, commands with mere presence, yep, that's my master, he thought proudly, recalling Corbin's description of what a Jedi was supposed to be,

"You handled that very well, Master."

Qui Gon inclined his head in acknowledgment of Obi Wan's compliment.

"Thank you, Padawan." His eyes followed Corbin as he exited the port. "Keep your eye on that one. I sense there's more to him than his ill-temper. He could be trouble."

"Yes Master." Obi Wan spied Tia descending the boarding ramp and gestured towards her. "There's Miss Orman." His eyes swept appreciatively over her as she stepped off the ramp. "Looking very becoming I might add. Are you sure you won't consider trading places with me tonight?" he said teasingly.

"Don't tempt me," Qui Gon responded brusquely, but Obi Wan noticed he was fighting a smile. Qui Gon turned away from his apprentice and faced Tia as she walked over to him. She did look very nice. He wondered if he should say so. Perhaps it would help cool her presently hot temper.

"There's been a slight change of plans," Tia was saying. "Mandie doesn't feel like traipsing through town so you're stuck with just me this evening, MASTER Jinn." She stressed his formal title as well as all its implications.

Qui Gon closed his eyes briefly and took another deep breath. He'd be damned if he would tell her she looked nice now. "After you," he said simply, gesturing her forward.

Tia glared up at him and started off. His present dispassionate demeanor made her even more angry at him than she already was. He could have at least tried to sound a little anxious about going out with her.

Mandie skipped down the boarding ramp shortly after Qui Gon and Tia had left the hangar. Obi Wan shifted over and made room for her to sit beside him. He offered his hand to help her up and she climbed up next to him. He smiled at her and leaned into her a little bit.

"You didn't have to stay with me. You could have gone with Tia if you wanted," he told her.

Mandie shook her head. "I didn't want to. I wanted to be with you." She leaned into him as well and he put his arm around her shoulders.

"Well, I'm glad you did," he confessed, and lightly kissed the top of her head. He noticed how Mandie had snuggled up against him and had snaked her arm beneath his cloak to wrap around his waist. He sighed contentedly.

"You haven't seen Corbin lately have you?" Mandie asked. "Tia wants me to find him and tell him about Dorvan."

Obi Wan made a face. "He was just here. He already knows."

Mandie sighed. "Was he upset?"

Obi Wan nodded. "You could say that."

"He...didn't do anything stupid, did he?"

"Nah," Obi Wan assured her. "I think Qui Gon was able to stave off any notions of stupidity Corbin might have entertained." He shook his head. "Sometimes I wish I had the kind of presence Qui Gon has. I wish I was tall and strong and noble-looking. It wouldn't be so bad, but I look younger than I really am and I'm too short for my age. Maybe I should grow a beard, what do you think?" He sighed. "But, I probably shouldn't dwell on such superficial characteristics. And as Master Yoda always says, size matters not."

"Well I think this Master Yoda is right," Mandie agreed. "It's not how tall or strong you are that matters, it's who you are. Besides," Mandie's eyes slowly drifted from his face, down his neck. He did have a sexy neck. "I think you're very handsome, Obi Wan," she sighed. She looked up at him adoringly.

Obi Wan smiled slowly. "I'm glad you think so," he breathed. Mandie nodded. He touched her face with his free hand and tilted her head back, his gaze piercing.

Mandie angled herself to face him more directly. Obi Wan sighed as he stared into her deep green eyes. He lowered his face to hers, nuzzling her cheek. She closed her eyes and parted her lips. Encouraged, he brushed his lips across hers in a tentative, teasing kiss, then opened her mouth further by sliding his jaw gently against her chin, pressing her lips into his by tightening his arm around her and cradling her head in his hand. He held her to him, savoring all the tremulous sensations flowing through his body and absorbing all the surfacing emotions he felt emanating from her. He heard her whimper softly and felt her weight settle in his arms. Mandie put her hand on his neck, then let it slide down to his chest. She slipped her hand between the folds of his tunic and began slowly dragging her fingers through his chest hair. Obi Wan closed his eyes and moaned faintly

Mandie's mouth moved to the hard muscle on the side of his neck. She nipped at it, then bit it, pulling on his skin gently with her teeth. She stroked his flesh with her tongue, sucking and chewing at the same time.

Obi Wan felt tiny bursts of stinging pain and waves of penetrating pleasure. The small section of his neck that she tortured was getting hot and numb and he didn't think he could stand much more of this peculiar and intimate kiss. Finally, he pulled away from her, his neck throbbing, his mind reeling and covered her mouth with his.

The Jedi kissed her harder, wanting to feel more of her, wanting her even closer to him than she already was. Obi Wan shifted slightly and eased her back, carefully supporting her with his arm until she was laying beneath him, and positioned himself over her. He passed his hand slowly over her breast, then down the length of her torso as she folded her arms around his neck, drawing him more tightly against her. He felt her leg move over his thigh encouragingly and he couldn't resist moving his hips a little, gently rubbing himself against her. Obi Wan felt her tremble slightly. He felt like his own body was waking after a long deep sleep, searching and hungry, craving more of her than he had any right to take.

Mandie whimpered and sighed, her mind swirling with desire. I want

you, I want you so much, she thought to herself, reveling in the sensation of the weight of his body stretched out over hers. If he wanted her to, she would give herself to him without hesitation. She would do anything to make him her own. Anything to keep him close to her.

An unwelcome thought suddenly struck her, filling her with a sad hopelessness. Mandie realized that no matter what she did or said, he would never belong to her. He never could.

"You're so beautiful," Obi Wan whispered, peering down at her. Mandie opened her eyes and looked up at him, longingly, then turned her face away from him. Obi Wan was startled by the sadness he suddenly sensed from her. "Mandie...?" He softly kissed her eyes and stroked the side of her face with his fingertips. "What is it? Tell me."

Mandie shook her head, and suddenly pushed him off of her. Obi Wan sat up and looked at her, confused. She jumped down from the crates and began walking away.

"Mandie!" Obi Wan called. She didn't stop. Obi Wan sighed heavily. He began to wonder if he had correctly interpreted what he had sensed in her. What could he have possibly done to make her sad? One minute she was the personification of passion and the next minute she was sad. It didn't make any sense. Maybe she was actually angry, or disappointed, or she had gotten embarrassed, considering they had chosen a rather public place to start doing the things they did. Obi Wan looked around. The crew was almost done loading. Only a few crates remained outside the ship. There wasn't anyone suspicious or new lurking around. No one seemed to have noticed anything or if they did, they didn't show any signs of caring one whit. Obi Wan jumped down from the crates and sprinted up the boarding ramp.

Tia and Qui Gon hadn't spoken a word to each other since they had left the port. Tia had hired transportation to an exclusive hotel that boasted the finest restaurant in the city. She strolled in like she owned the place (Qui Gon wouldn't have been surprised if she had) and over to the maitre d.

"Ah, Miss Orman!" he greeted. "How lovely to see you again. We heard you might be gracing us with your presence and reserved your favorite booth for you by the window overlooking the bay."

Tia smiled widely. "Why thank you! How considerate of you, Lemme!"

"Not at all," Lemme said, taking her hand to usher her inside. He spared a disquieted look back at Qui Gon who trailed after them, looking around, taking in the scenery. "Is he with you, Miss Orman?" Lemme lowered his voice considerably in case the man following her was not with her after all.

Qui Gon heard him anyway and furrowed his brow. Tia glanced back at the Jedi with an amused look.

"Yes, Lemme. He's with me. He's...my bodyguard."

Lemme nodded, but tried to avoid getting too close to Qui Gon. "Very

well, Miss Orman." He leaned over her as she sat down at the booth that had been reserved for her. "Will he be dining with you as well?"

Tia looked up at Qui Gon and pretended to think long and hard. Finally she nodded. "I think so, Lemme. When he doesn't eat, he gets mean. I had better feed him tonight." Her eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Of course, Miss Orman, I'll send the waiter right over!" Lemme said and hurried off.

Qui Gon squeezed into the seat across from Tia and sighed heavily. "You enjoyed that exchange far too much," he began, sounding insulted.

Tia started to laugh and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Qui Gon. I just couldn't resist. Poor Lemme. He obviously failed to recognize your unpretentious Jedi vestments."

Qui Gon pulled his cloak tighter around him, sulking. "He was looking at me as if I were a common thug."

Tia gazed at him and smiled. "Maybe it's the long hair. Or the beard. Who knows. I don't think you look like a thug."

"You could have reassured him. You didn't have to lead him on at my expense," the Jedi continued. He locked his eyes on hers and held her gaze steadily. "And when was I reduced to the role of your bodyguard?" he asked quietly.

Tia frowned and reached across the table and touched his arm. "You know I was just teasing, Qui Gon." She blinked a few times, confused. "Why would something like that bother you?" He didn't answer her. His face was expressionless, but his gaze was still piercing. Tia sighed. "When Lemme comes back, I will properly introduce you, I promise."

"Thank you," Qui Gon said and took a deep breath. He leaned forward slightly. "Now, why have you been angry with me tonight?"

Tia shrugged. "I'm getting over it. I'm much too fond of you to hold a grudge. I just thought you treated Obi Wan unfairly back on the bridge. You need to remember, he's only sixteen. He has a young heart and a young mind, Qui Gon. But you seem to disregard that about him. It's always duty first, even where he's involved. Don't you ever just let him have fun?" She bowed her head and studied her nails, unable to look Qui Gon in the eye suddenly. "Thankfully Mandie stayed behind. She's a sensitive kid and she knew Obi Wan was disappointed."

"Oh and I didn't?" Qui Gon asked. "I knew he was disappointed. I felt it in my heart. But the reality of our situation doesn't provide me with the luxury of indulging him. Someone had to stay with the ship. You never know what might happen. Thankfully, he's wise and responsible and knew I was right."

Tia felt increasingly uncomfortable. "I just don't understand you. How can you be that way with him? You treat him like an assistant even though you're raising him in a sense. I thought he would be more

like a son to you."

Qui Gon took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "He is like my son. Our bond transcends blood ties. We're connected, he and I, in ways you could never understand. We know each other better than a father knows a son. We're good friends. But he is also my pupil, my partner, and my assistant. And he is a Jedi, in the finest sense. He knows what is expected of him if he wants to achieve Knighthood, so there is no animosity between us. He trusts me, like no one has ever trusted me before. I would never do anything to harm him. Ever."

Tia frowned deeply then chewed her lower lip fitfully. "Do you ever tell him that?"

Qui Gon paused. "I'm certain he is aware of my feelings towards him. We are completely devoted to each other. I am dedicated to teach him everything I can. He is dedicated to learn from me."

"Forgive me," Tia whispered. "I can see now that I've made a mistake. A really big, stupid mistake."

Qui Gon felt a surge of her emotions and struggled to sort out what exactly she was feeling all of a sudden. He knew she was referring to something besides her misinterpretation of his relationship with his apprentice. "What is, Tia? What are you talking about?"

Tia shook her head. "I'm really sorry, Qui Gon."

"Why are you apologizing?" he questioned her, thoroughly baffled. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Tia looked over at him longingly. "I thought I understood, but I didn't. I thought I could handle it, but I can't." She stood up suddenly. "I think I need some air," she announced.

"I'll come with you," Qui Gon offered quietly.

"No! Please," Tia replied, almost panicking. "I don't want you to." She turned from him and walked quickly out of the restaurant.

Qui Gon waited only a moment before picking himself up and starting after her.

The sun had set and it was dark now. Qui Gon paused just outside the restaurant and looked around. He didn't see Tia. He cleared his mind of all the thoughts racing through his consciousness and gathered the Force to him, sending it out to locate her. He sensed her just a few streets away from him and started off in that general direction.

He was surprised she was able to get that far from him in such a short time but he wasn't alarmed, certain he would overtake her before long. The sense of her presence was growing stronger and getting clearer. But something wasn't quite right. He forced himself to calm down and focus more directly on her exact location.

Her fear hit him like a shot from a blaster. It was then he heard her scream. Startled, he broke into a run and yelled her name.

She didn't answer. Qui Gon fought the panic threatening to overwhelm him and concentrated on where she was. His own fear for her was inhibiting his ability to utilize the Force. He stopped suddenly and closed his eyes, allowing the Force to think for him. She was here. Right where he was standing. He opened his eyes but couldn't see her. Still, the sense of her presence was so strong, he knew she was very close.

"Tia? Answer me!"

He heard another scream, muffled this time. Then someone cursed, followed by a flurry of blunt sounds. Qui Gon turned around sharply and Tia suddenly burst out of the shadows towards him. Someone was pursuing her, but stopped short when they saw the Jedi. Qui Gon felt the being's life force and the darkness and evil that surrounded it. For some reason, it held a glimmer of familiarity. He drew his lightsaber and pulled Tia up against him.

Qui Gon faced the being in the shadows, certain he was looking in its eyes. Human, he thought. It's human.

The person seemed reluctant to give up on Tia so easily. He stood waiting and watching, as if wondering what the Jedi planned to do next.

Qui Gon waited too. He tucked Tia under his arm and squeezed her tightly in a reassuring hug. His mind was clear now and all his senses sharply alert. He heard the quiet whispering of the Force in his blood and found himself reacting before he realized why.

The human in the shadows suddenly began shooting at the Jedi, aiming carefully to avoid hitting Tia.

Qui Gon easily deflected each blast back into the shadows. Tia screamed again and buried her head against Qui Gon's chest. She felt him suddenly relax and heard the raspy hiss of his lightsaber being deactivated. Tia summoned the courage to look up.

"He's gone," Qui Gon announced, taking a deep cleansing breath. He released Tia and stalked around the shadows where her pursuer had just been.

Tia looked around wildly. "Did you kill him?"

"No, he just left."

Tia stood back, trembling and panting, trying to recover from her ordeal.

Qui Gon returned to her and pulled her into his arms. He stroked her hair and whispered to her, sending her waves of reassurance with the Force. She steadily began to calm down, but Qui Gon could sense she was still very shaken.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

"Someone grabbed me, just outside the restaurant," Tia said and sniffed back tears that threatened. "They threw me into the back of a speeder and drove off." She wiped at her eyes and winced.

The pain Qui Gon sensed from her startled him. He tilted her face up to him and tried to examine her in the light of the moons. Her right eye was swelling and even in the darkness, Qui Gon could see a black circle forming rapidly over her right temple. He immediately began checking her over for other bruises or marks. She didn't seem to be seriously hurt, but she was banged up to a certain extent.

"I managed to jump out of the speeder, but the guy came after me," Tia continued. "He caught me and hit me. He began threatening me. He spoke Basic so I understood him clearly. He kept saying I was too valuable and he wasn't going to miss a chance like this," she relayed.

Qui Gon sighed. "Sounds like he intended to kidnap you and hold you for ransom," he told her solemnly. He put his arm around her and looked around. "I don't think we should risk trying to make it back to the ship tonight. I think we should go back to the hotel. We can see to your injuries and get you something to eat and let you rest. I'll stay with you. Then in the morning we can head out and return to the ship. I'll contact Obi Wan and tell him what happened and not to expect us back tonight. I'll also tell him to keep a close eye on Mandie. Make sure she stays on the ship."

Tia looked up at him horrified. "What, do you think this person might go after Mandie too?"

"It's possible. If he knew about you, I'm sure he knows about Mandie."

"Oh, Qui Gon, we have to go back tonight then! We can't just leave her alone like that!" Tia protested.

Qui Gon shook his head. "She's not alone. She has Obi Wan," he told her calmly.

Tia's brow furrowed. "You must have an awful lot of faith in that boy."

"I do. And he's not so much a boy anymore. He's almost a grown man. Obi Wan would give his life for Mandie if he has to. He'll take care of her. He'll protect her."

His voice conveyed such absolute certainty and cool confidence, Tia's cause for concern seemed unwarranted. She sighed and smiled up at him. "I understand. Really I do," she whispered and stretched up to kiss his cheek. "And I trust you too."

Qui Gon took Tia back to the hotel.

Lemme spied them in the lobby and hurried over with a shocked expression.

"Miss Orman, gracious! What happened?"

"I'm all right, Lemme. I just...fell out of a speeder." Tia tried futilely to repair her torn dress and tried to hide her blackened eye.

"We'll need a room for the night and food brought up," Qui Gon told Lemme. "Can you make arrangements for us?"

Lemme nodded. "I'll see to it personally." He turned quickly and started towards the guest register desk, but Tia suddenly called him back.

"Lemme, I didn't introduce you properly before," she said, gazing up at Qui Gon. "This is Qui Gon Jinn. He's a Jedi Master and a very dear friend of mine. He is to be treated with the respect worthy of someone of his status." She reached over and took Qui Gon's hand in hers and squeezed it tightly. She was pleased when he smiled at her and squeezed it back.

Obi Wan strode through the ship's narrow halls, peering into each open door he passed, stretching out with the Force to try to find Mandie. The girl had a knack for disappearing with clinical efficiency.

The droid HJK-260 turned down the hallway and headed towards him.

"Excuse me, Sir," he hailed. "But you wouldn't have seen Mr. Roos anywhere by chance, would you?"

Obi Wan shook his head. "No. You haven't seen Mandie recently have you?"

"Not since this afternoon," HJ told him.

Obi Wan sighed. "Well, if you do see her, tell her...oh, never mind." He cursed under his breath and started back up the hall. HJ went in the opposite direction.

You really blew it this time, Obi Wan told himself. What were you thinking? What were you thinking with? Certainly not your brain! She just couldn't get away from you fast enough. She doesn't want anything to do with you anymore. Can you blame her? You selfish, insensitive, unworthy lech! She deserves better than you!

He couldn't seem to insult himself enough on her behalf. He was in the process of trying to think of new and more creatively derogatory terms to hurl at himself when he suddenly heard Qui Gon's voice calling to him over the comlink. He yanked it off his utility belt and responded.

"Yes Master?"

"Where's Mandie?"

Obi Wan was startled. How could he have known she was missing?
"I...I'm not sure."

"Find her and stick with her, no matter what," Qui Gon stated emphatically.

"What's going on?"

"Someone tried to kidnap Tia tonight. He failed so I feel it's possible he may try to get to Mandie instead. Don't let her leave the ship and don't let her out of your sight. I don't want to try to make it back to the ship at this hour with that kidnapper still out there. Tia has been through enough for one night. We're at a hotel now. We'll be back at the ship in the morning."

Obi Wan's heart skipped a few beats. "Is Miss Orman all right?"

"She's more shaken up than anything. Some nasty bruises and abrasions, but nothing I can't take care of."

Obi Wan took a deep breath. "Tell her not to worry about Mandie. I'll look after her."

"I already have," Qui Gon said and signed off.

Obi Wan returned the comlink to his belt. He bit his lip and looked around hopelessly. His desire to find Mandie had doubled now. He had already searched the ship twice. But she had to be somewhere close. He could still sense her.

There was one way he could keep her here even if he couldn't find her. He walked quickly over to an intercom panel and pushed the access code to the bridge.

Captain Fostey answered. "Bridge. Fostey speaking."

"Captain, this is Obi Wan Kenobi. There's been a change in plans. Miss Orman and Qui Gon are staying in the city for tonight. Miss Orman has been injured and Qui Gon feels it is best for her to stay put. We need to seal the ship for the night however. We need to account for everyone on board and seal it as soon as possible."

"Seal the ship? We won't be leaving tonight? When did all this come about? I wasn't informed!"

"Well I was," Obi Wan said somewhat impatiently. "Account for everyone and seal the ship!"

Captain Fostey sighed. "Well, everyone is already accounted for except for Miss Tia, Master Jinn, and Mr. Roos. Actually everyone then except for Mr. Roos."

Corbin could be out all night, it was too risky to keep the ship open just for him. "Mr. Roos is accounted for. Seal the ship. I'll take full responsibility."

"Very well, Obi Wan Kenobi. I hope you know what you're doing."

Obi Wan turned off the intercom and sighed. "I do too."

Mandie curled up tighter against the crates and wrapped her arms around her knees. It was starting to get cold in the cargo hold, but the quiet darkness was comforting. She wanted to be alone for a bit

to think. She knew Obi Wan was probably looking for her, but she needed to stay away from him for a little while. She couldn't think very clearly when he was near her. She was confused and didn't know what she wanted anymore.

She wished Tia was back. Tia could help her sort through what she was feeling. Tia would know what she should do. Mandie sighed heavily. She wanted to talk to Tia more than anything.

Maybe she was back and Mandie just hadn't realized. Stiffly she climbed to her feet and started for the passageway which would lead back into the ship.

A loud grating noise suddenly filled the cargo hold. Mandie covered her ears and winced.

"What in the world?!" She looked around quickly, then heard a bang and a soft hiss of air. Her jaw dropped. They had sealed the ship! They must be getting ready to leave, she thought. She hurried over to the passage and had just reached the door, when it opened suddenly and Obi Wan stalked in. He sighed heavily when he saw her and put his hands on his hips.

"This was the only place I hadn't searched yet," he said with an irritated edge to his voice.

Mandie avoided his eyes. "Well, I was just on my way out so if you'll excuse me," she murmured. She started for the passage but Obi Wan quickly stepped forward and caged her to the doorframe with his arms.

"Oh no you don't!" he hissed. "Do you have any idea how long I've been looking for you? Is this what you do, run away and hide whenever you're upset? Worry people sick to punish them for upsetting you instead of discussing your feelings like a rational adult?" He glared at her, but she still would not look up at him.

"No," Mandie replied in a small voice. "I didn't mean to worry you."

Obi Wan sighed heavily and dropped his arms, leaning back against the doorframe opposite Mandie. "I'm sorry. Sometimes my temper gets away from me. It's just that I was getting worried. I needed to find you." He lowered his eyes briefly and tried to think of an easy way to break the news about Tia to her. "Mandie, something has happened...While Tia and Qui Gon were in town. It seems someone tried to...kidnap Tia."

Mandie's eyes shot up to his. "What?!!!"

"She's okay, she with Qui Gon," Obi Wan hurriedly explained. "They're staying in town for the night and I've ordered the ship sealed. Qui Gon thinks there's a possibility whoever made this attempt at kidnapping Tia, might try to come for you."

Mandie shrunk against the wall. "Poor Tia," she whispered. "How horrible!"

Obi Wan sensed Mandie's fear. "Really, she's all right," he assured her. "She's safe, and you're safe and nothing is going to happen to

you, I promise." He reached out tentatively to touch her face, but decided against it and pulled his hand back.

Mandie caught Obi Wan's hand and squeezed it. She stepped over to him and put her arms around him, burying her face in the collar of his cloak. Obi Wan sighed heavily as he held her and kissed her hair. "It's all right," he whispered.

"I know," she breathed. "When you hold me, I feel so secure. You make everything all right again."

Obi Wan frowned. "Do I?" he asked quietly. He couldn't believe that, even though he felt the sincerity behind her words.

Mandie looked up at him. Obi Wan shook his head and pulled away from her. He took a couple of steps back and sighed.

"You're just as unhappy with me as you were with Corbin. I can feel your confusion and your uncertainty towards me." He bowed his head and turned away from her. "Listen Mandie, I want to apologize for the way I behaved earlier. Back in the hangar. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable or sad or whatever it was that made you leave. I realize now I was completely out of line and I promise I won't touch you like that again. I'm not really sure what came over me, but I would have stopped if I had sensed you wanted me to."

Mandie shook her head. She crossed her arms and lowered her eyes. "No, Obi Wan, don't apologize. It wasn't that I wanted you to stop touching me. I love it when you touch me. That's not why I ran off." She paused and took a deep breath. "I'm unhappy because it occurred to me back there that I wanted more from you than you're willing to give me."

Obi Wan didn't understand. He couldn't think of anything he'd ever deny her. He resisted the urge to face her. "I'm willing to give you all that I can, Mandie."

"I know," she sighed. "And I have no right to ask you for more than that, but with the way I'm starting to feel about you, I know I'm setting myself up to be hurt."

Obi Wan turned then and came up beside her. She was withdrawing from him, pulling her feelings deep inside of her. It was as if she were trying to distance herself from him emotionally.

"Is that why you are afraid to care about me?" he inquired. "Mandie, I would never intentionally hurt you. Can't you tell how much you mean to me?"

Mandie leaned into him slightly. She reached up and put her arms around his neck. "That's just it, you mean a lot to me too, but let's face it. After we get to Aurelia, you and Qui Gon will leave for another mission, probably across the galaxy and that will be that. We'll never see each other again. You'll meet other girls in other systems and I will just be the one you knew from Aurelia."

Obi Wan smiled reassuringly and put his hands on her waist. "A different girl in every port, is that what you're thinking? Well, it's not like that at all. And no matter what, you'll never be just 'the girl I knew from Aurelia.' You are the first girl I ever wanted

to kiss, the first girl I ever lost my heart to...the first girl I ever tried to make out with on tarp covered crates in the middle of a hangar bay," he added with an impish grin. Mandie laughed and blushed prettily. Obi Wan rubbed his cheek against hers affectionately and kissed her forehead. Mandie smiled and hugged him tightly.

"I've learned never to say never," he continued. "If we want to see each other again, we will."

"I want to believe that," she whispered.

"You can. I'm sure we will meet again. I don't know how or when," he assured, "But we will, someday." He laughed suddenly. "And knowing your sister, I wouldn't put anything past her!" Mandie nodded in wholehearted agreement and laughed too.

Obi Wan felt the heaviness in her heart lift and sighed. He hugged her back, holding her tightly against him as an unexpected wave of emotion came over him. He realized how important Mandie was becoming to him and how it scared him to think she could be in danger. He empathized with Qui Gon about Tia and his heart went out to his master.

In the hotel room he was sharing with Tia, Qui Gon finished off the last of the tart red fruit that had accompanied their meal and eased himself down on one of the large room's beds. He leaned back against the headboard and stretched out his legs with a contented sigh.

Tia was showering in the bath, giving him a moment alone with his thoughts. He closed his eyes and submersed himself in a meditative state; something he had precious little time for lately. He drew from the Force, letting it fill him and connect him to everything in the room. He could feel his body relaxing and all the tension and emotions of the day slipping away. In its place grew a blissful serenity and welcome silence.

"Qui Gon!" Tia called from the bath, sticking her head out the door.

Qui Gon's eyes popped open. So much for silence, he thought and swung his legs over the side of his bed. He rose slowly, stretching before making his way over to Tia.

"What's the matter, Tia?" he sighed.

She smiled sheepishly. "Well, this somewhat impromptu sleepover you insisted on has left me with a tiny dilemma."

Qui Gon smiled back at her placatingly. "And what would that be?"

Her smile turned mischievous. "I've nothing to wear now," she whispered.

Qui Gon frowned. "What about your dress?"

Tia shook her head. "It's filthy and it's ripped. When I took it off for my shower, the damn thing practically disintegrated."

Qui Gon thought for a moment, then began pulling off his cloak. "Here, wear this. It's not exactly clean, but it will keep you warm...and covered." He handed it to her through the partially opened door.

Tia's eyes sparkled with delight as she accepted it. "This is all very well, but what's Obi Wan going to think when I show up back at the ship tomorrow wearing nothing but your robe?" she teased.

Qui Gon grinned. "It's just for tonight," he explained. "We'll find you something else for tomorrow."

Tia immersed from the bath, wrapped in the Jedi Master's cloak. She walked over to her bed, a quarter of the cloak dragging on the floor behind her, her hands hopelessly lost somewhere in the middle of the sleeves. She presented such an amusing and endearing picture, Qui Gon couldn't help but laugh.

She looked back at him, feigning insult, as she sat on the edge of the bed. Modestly trying to keep the cloak from shifting, she lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes with a soft sigh.

"I feel a lot better," she murmured.

"Good," Qui Gon said quietly. He looked at the now vacant bath longingly. He could almost feel the pulsing hot spray of water scouring away the last of his stress. Reaching a quick decision, he leaned over and began pulling off his boots. "I think I'll shower too. I won't be long, I promise."

Tia opened her eyes and peered over at him. "Oh, go ahead. I'll be fine." She watched as he removed his belt and draped it over a nearby chair, then began to unwind the sash from around his waist.

Tia sat up now. This was becoming more interesting with each passing second. Her eyes grew wide as he pulled off his tunic and she wondered how much more of his clothing the Jedi was going to remove in front of her. She bit her lip hard as she drank in the sight of his exquisitely sculpted chest, broad muscular shoulders, and his tapered narrow waist. She had always assumed he was fit, but she had no idea he looked like this under all those robes.

Qui Gon looked up at her curiously. He couldn't interpret the barrage of feelings he suddenly sensed from her and decided her current anxiety must stem from some residual vulnerability she may be feeling from her ordeal with the kidnapper. "I'll only be a minute or two," he assured her again. He reached up behind his head and pulled out the black band that held his hair back from his face. He tossed it on an end table.

Tia's jaw slackened and dropped. She watched him drag his large hand through his hair a few times, tousling it in a very appealing disarray and thought she had never seen a man do anything sexier. He grinned at her, turned, and finally disappeared behind the door to the bath, leaving Tia feeling quivery and weak.

She sunk back against the pillows and closed her eyes tight. Had he purposefully done that just to torture her? Was he punishing her? Well, she refused to give him the satisfaction. She wasn't even going

to give him a second thought, she was just going to roll over and get some sleep.

She sighed and tried to clear her mind, but images of what was taking place on the other side of the door to the bath kept flashing through her mind. She squirmed uncomfortably, pulling the cloak tighter around herself as she heard the water being turned on. She wondered if he had suffered this much through her shower.

Think of something else, Tia commanded herself. Unconsciously, her hand went to her bruised eye and rubbed it softly. That brought unwelcome images of the attempted abduction to mind. She could still feel that man grabbing her and throwing her into the speeder. Her jaw still ached where he had hit her. Fear began rising inside her again as she realized how easily the kidnapper had plucked her off the street and what would have possibly become of her if Qui Gon had not found her.

A sudden unexpected clatter in the hall outside the room startled her and made her sit up. She waited and listened, then sighed, dismissing it as a service droid or something. She chided herself for being so jittery and tried to lay back down.

Okay Tia, go back to thinking of Qui Gon in the shower. Don't think about what almost happened tonight. Don't think about the kidnapper, don't think about being shot at---

Another unexpected sound from the hall had her on her feet and skipping over to the door of the bath. Even though she knew the Jedi was only in the next room, he seemed too far away. She opened the door, flew inside, and closed it quickly behind her.

The bath was steamy and warm and had an immediately soothing effect on her. It was only then that she became aware of exactly what she had just done and her stomach suddenly knotted with a totally new anxiety. Slowly she turned around.

Through the mist and the cascading water sheeting the clear shower walls, she could just barely see him, but she knew he was looking at her. Tia closed her eyes tightly as she waited for him to yell at her for so rudely invading his privacy and banish her back into the living room, but instead, when he finally did speak, his smoothly melodic voice only conveyed quiet concern.

"Tia, what is it? Why are you frightened?"

Slowly Tia opened her eyes, suddenly feeling foolish and very embarrassed. "I heard noises. I kept thinking about the kidnapper and I...didn't want to be alone out there." She swallowed hard and stepped a little closer to the shower. "Look, I know it's silly but I couldn't help it."

"It's all right," he told her.

Tia sighed, relieved. He wasn't angry and he didn't think she was being foolish. She stepped even closer.

She could see him better now and made a half-hearted effort to resist the urge to really look at him but nevertheless, found her eyes drifting downwards.

"You are gorgeous," she whispered. Her heart began to pound, her mouth went completely dry, and her knees felt weak. Breathe Tia, she told herself, and inhaled deeply, gasping for air.

This is a dream, she thought. I'm merely conjuring up this vision of male perfection that's standing before my eyes. She became even more convinced she was dreaming when the Jedi opened the shower door and held out his hand to her in a silent invitation.

Tia stared at his hand momentarily shocked, her mind racing. Okay, she began trying to think clearly. This is my dream and I can make it go one way or the other. As her mind struggled to rationalize the consequences of either route, her hands moved to open the cloak wrapped around her and pushed it off her shoulders. It fell heavily to the floor and she stepped clear of it and towards him. She took his hand and he gently pulled her into the shower and under the hot stream of water.

Corbin slammed his fists against the side of the sealed ship and cursed soundly. Things only seemed to be going from bad to worse.

He turned, knowing it was futile to try to get inside the ship now. All he could do was wait. He was aware of the fact that Tia and the Jedi Master had gone to a hotel, since he had followed them, and knew the ship wasn't going anywhere without them. So there would be no chance of him being stranded here.

He sat down on the ground and pulled his coat tighter around him. Damn Jedi, this was all their fault. Everything had been planned to perfection. Once the ship had entered into the Trade Federation's unrecognized and unsecured route surrounding the planet Dorvan, it could have easily been overtaken and its cargo confiscated. It would be during this unfortunate attack that the lovely Orman sisters would have been abducted and held for a significant ransom which their very rich and very powerful father would have quickly paid. Now nearly every plan had to be changed. There was little chance Corbin's consorts could find the ship and attack it if it was not going to Dorvan and his last hope for a ransom had just been thwarted as well. No jewels, no ransom, no nothing.

He sighed heavily and flexed his hand. It was sore from striking Tia. His eyes went to the grazing burn on his coat sleeve from having his own blaster fire being shot back at him. If it weren't for that irksome Jedi, he would have at least gotten Tia. Taking Mandie would have been simple. Before, she would have willingly and trustingly gone with him. Now, because of that irksome Jedi's sidekick, she wanted nothing to do with him anymore. To make matters worse, she never left the boy's side. The only thing left to do if he wanted to salvage any of this was to dispose of those Jedi.

Obi Wan looked around him as he waited for Mandie to open the door to her room. He felt something. A mysteriously unsettling darkness that was perplexing to him. Mandie glanced back at him and sighed heavily.

"What are you looking for?" she asked him. She ushered him inside the room and quickly powered up the lights. He glanced around quickly.

"I sense something. A disturbance in the Force," he relayed. "It wasn't there a little while ago."

"Well you're making me nervous," Mandie told him and crossed her arms over her chest.

Obi Wan came up behind her and tucked her up against him and lay his cheek against hers. "I'm sorry. I don't mean scare you. You really have nothing to worry about. The ship is sealed and no one can get in. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise. It's just that I've learned to trust whatever I feel."

"What is it you're feeling?" she asked anxiously.

Obi Wan smiled easily and nipped her earlobe playfully. He could interpret her question in one of two ways. He chose the less obvious meaning, hoping to lighten her mood. "Can't you tell?" he whispered seductively in her ear. Mandie laughed and leaned back against him and he hugged her tightly. "I'm hungry," he added in a matter-of-fact tone.

Mandie smiled. "I'll call the kitchen and have them send something up for us as soon as I contact Tia. If they are at a hotel, it's probably the Pivoine. That's the one we always stay at whenever we come here." She pulled away from Obi Wan and crossed the room to the holoprojector. "The number code is in this directory. I'll only be a minute. I just want to talk to her and see if she's all right, okay?"

Obi Wan nodded but said, "You don't have to contact her. I'm sure she's fine. Qui Gon is with her and he'll protect her. I'm sure what I'm sensing has nothing to do with her."

Mandie shrugged. "I know. It's just that I would feel so much better if I could just talk to her for a little while. You understand, don't you?"

Obi Wan smiled. "Of course. Take all the time you want." He began strolling leisurely around the room. "I've gone without food this long, I can certainly last a few more minutes." Mandie grinned and turned her attention to the holoprojector.

Obi Wan continued wandering around the room as he waited for Mandie to finish her calls, examining the contents and Mandie's personal effects. A flicker of blue-white light on top of Mandie's vanity dresser caught his eye. He walked over to it and saw several pale blue gemstones slightly smaller than the palm of his hand. He picked one up and studied it curiously.

Depending on how he turned the stone, it would catch the light and refract it in tiny beams of varying colors. They glittered delicately in his hand as he gathered them up for closer inspection. Obi Wan thought he had never seen anything more exquisitely beautiful before. The way they were cut reminded him of focusing crystals and by holding a stone directly in front of the light and turning it, the

tiny beams of color extended or retracted like minature lightsabers.

He was so mesmerized by the crystals he didn't realize Mandie was standing next to him until she spoke.

"They're beautiful aren't they?"

He looked over at her. "Are these star allees? Is this what we're transporting?"

Mandie nodded. "Yes, but these have been cut and the ones we are taking to Aurelia are fresh from the mines." She picked up one of the gems as Obi Wan returned them to their place on her vanity and held it up to him. "This one is my favorite. It's such a light blue it's almost white. It catches the light better than the others and the colors it casts are more intense." She brought it closer to his face. "Look at that, it's the same color as your eyes. Maybe that's why I like it so much."

Obi Wan blushed in spite of himself. "I've never seen jewels of this quality before. They really are lovely."

Mandie lifted Obi Wan's hand and dropped the star allee onto his open palm. Then she closed his fingers around it. Obi Wan looked back at her stunned.

"I want you to have this one," she whispered.

Obi Wan was already shaking his head. "That's very sweet and generous of you, but I can't possibly accept it. It must be...worth a fortune."

Mandie shook her head. "No, these particular ones are beautiful, but they're relatively worthless."

"Worthless?" Obi Wan looked at the glittering jewel in his hand and sighed. "How could something like this be worthless?"

Mandie smiled. "Well, I mean worthless in a monetary sense. Worthless but not useless."

Obi Wan glanced up at her. "I don't understand."

Now Mandie laughed. "Obi Wan! You of all people should recognize that cut. Didn't you notice when you turn it how it focuses the light into beams? Focuses?" she hinted.

Obi Wan's eyes grew wide. "Then it is a focusing crystal! I thought the cut was familiar but I've never seen one quite like this before."

"These are the finest and rarest of their kind," Mandie explained. "They condense the energy into a tighter, denser blade. It's stronger and more powerful but actually uses less of the power cell's energy." She paused and smiled at his dumbstruck expression. "After I met you, I studied up on the focusing crystals used in lightsabers and began campaigning the company heads to cut more of the star allees into them. Unfortunately for the Jedi, the star allees are more profitable when they are cut for jewelry so not many of them get turned into

focusing crystals. Tia and I began working together and finally we got a shipment quota filled a couple of months ago and sent it to Coruscant to the Jedi Temple. They were very appreciative and contacted us to tell us if there was ever anything the council could do for us, all we needed to do was ask. Well, needless to say, when this shipment was scheduled, we decided to cash in the favor. That's how you and Qui Gon got assigned to us."

Obi Wan held up the crystal and rolled it slowly between his thumb and index finger. He spared a glance at Mandie who nodded encouragingly and smiled.

"Please accept it. I want you to have it more than anything," she said warmly.

Obi Wan swallowed hard and looked at her with rapidly watering eyes. "I...I don't know what to say. Thank you, Mandie. No one has ever given me anything like this before." He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Mandie reached for him and pulled him into her arms in a tight hug. She marvelled at how such a simple and valueless gift had practically moved him to tears. He was so different from Corbin, who always measured everything by its monetary worth alone. She shuddered involuntarily just thinking about him. Where was he anyway? He had all but disappeared after their spat on the bridge.

Obi Wan pulled back and looked at her concerned, sensing her shifting emotions. "What's the matter?"

"I was thinking of Corbin and how different you are from him. Two polar opposites. And yet I found him just as attractive as you at one time."

Obi Wan feigned insult. "And how would you explain that peculiar phenomenon?"

Mandie grinned and pretended to think long and hard. "I will only say that I had a thirst in need of slaking and Corbin was like your average alehouse brew, filling and satisfying for a time, but only because the house won't serve up anything better. Then there is you, who is like a new type of fine wine, to be sipped and savored and brought out only at the finest of occasions and only be served to the most discerning palates. And as you know, Tia and I have acquired a taste for new wine."

Obi Wan laughed. "Thank you, I think." He looked at his crystal once more then stored it in a pouch on his belt. "Speaking of Tia, were you able to contact her? How is she doing?"

Mandie frowned. "There wasn't any answer when the hotel service summoned her room." She shrugged. "I don't understand. I thought they would have stayed put for the night."

Now Obi Wan frowned. "That is strange." He reached down and pulled his comlink off his belt. "Here. I'll call Qui Gon. He'll answer this. Then you can talk to Tia. Okay?"

Mandie nodded and smiled as Obi Wan turned on the comlink.

Qui Gon groaned. Half from the immense physical pleasure that was coursing through his body from Tia's gifted administrations and half from the thought of having to answer the comlink that was suddenly and insistently calling to him from across the room.

Reluctantly, he lifted Tia off of him and planted her on the other side of the bed. Then he rolled over and sat up.

Tia looked up at him surprised. "Where do you think you're going? What's that noise?"

"My comlink. I have to answer it. Obi Wan wouldn't be calling unless it was important," he told her. He gave himself a moment to gain control over his erratic breathing before standing up and crossing the room to his discarded utility belt. He pushed his long hair back away from his face, sighed heavily and turned on the comlink.

"Yes Obi Wan?"

"Oh Master! We were getting a little worried," the padawan's voice rang out. "Is everything all right? Mandie tried to contact Miss Orman earlier using the hotel service but there wasn't any answer."

There wasn't any answer because Miss Orman was busy, Qui Gon responded mentally. "Yes everything is fine," he told Obi Wan, glancing back at Tia.

"Mandie wants to speak with Miss Orman."

Qui Gon closed his eyes and sighed. "Very well. Hold on." He stalked back to the bed where Tia lay tangled in the sheets. He held out the comlink to her. She took it with a questioning look. "It's for you. It's Mandie."

Tia smiled, amused. Qui Gon eased himself down beside Tia and pulled her up against him. He brushed her hair off her neck and began nibbling her shoulder. Tia inhaled sharply and tried to fend him off for the time being. "Mandie, are you okay, sweetheart?"

"Tia! Thank goodness! Are you all right?" Mandie asked anxiously.

Tia sighed and stifled a moan as Qui Gon began kissing her ear and stroking her sides languidly. "Oh I'm fine...I'm great, really." The aroused and amorous Jedi was making it very hard for her to think and speak clearly.

"Obi Wan told me what happened. He said you were all right, but I just had to hear it from you," Mandie continued.

"Well, don't worry anymore...I've never felt better," Tia told her and smiled at Qui Gon. She rolled over and reached up to trace the curve of his lower lip with her index finger. "I'm glad you called though," she added, hoping to reassure the girl enough to get her to sign off. Qui Gon caught her wayward finger between his teeth and began stroking her fingertip with his tongue. Tia felt tingles shimmy

through her, all the way to her toes.

"Oh I'm glad I called too," Mandie said.

"You get some rest tonight, I'll see you tomorrow morning," Tia suggested hopefully.

"Okay, good night Tia."

"Good night, Mandie."

Qui Gon reached over and snatched the comlink from her and quickly turned it off before anyone could say anything else. He tossed it on the bedside table, then turned back to Tia with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "Now, where were we?"

Tia pushed him on his back and straddled his hips. "Right about here," she whispered. She leaned down and kissed him, slipping her tongue into his mouth and rubbing it savoringly over his. He closed his eyes and groaned deeply, folding his arms across her back.

Tia pushed herself up and bracing her weight on her hands against his chest, she shifted her hips, carefully positioning herself on him and slowly leaned back, pressing him into her. She drew a deep breath and released it gradually with a low moan.

Qui Gon looked up at her admiringly. His hands slowly snaked up her thighs to her stomach and over her breasts. He began caressing her, pinching her nipples and then rubbed his thumbs over the sensitized tips. Tia leaned into his hands and began rocking her hips against him, slowly and consistently. Her hands moved to his wrists and slid down the hard curves of his arms and over his shoulders. Qui Gon began moving with her, gauging her responses to the increased pressure, and settled into a comfortable rhythm.

"I always thought we moved well together," Tia panted.

"Yes," Qui Gon sighed. "From the way you danced with me."

"It's that perfect Jedi rhythm ...and timing."

Qui Gon groaned and growled and smiled. "Dueling...dancing, making love, it's all the same. Is that what you're saying?"

Tia grinned. "You do make love as well as you dance," she breathed shakily. Reaching down, she threaded her fingers through his hair and happily tangled them in his silky locks. She stretched out her legs and entwined them with his, forcing their hips closer together. She began grinding against him harder and faster.

"So do you..." the Jedi said and moved his hands to her waist, causing Tia to sit back on him and push him deeper inside her. His body began screaming at him for release but he refused to give into it just yet. He clenched his teeth in luscious torment.

Tia moaned and closed her eyes as he took her hands in his and laced his fingers through hers. Her mind centered on the delirious pleasure she was feeling and she marvelled at how right everything felt; how comfortable they were with each other. It was as though they had been lovers for a long time. He seemed to know her so completely. He knew

just what to do, how to touch her, and what pleased her. What was even more surprising, was that Tia felt she knew him just as well. She knew exactly what he liked, but she couldn't begin to understand why.

Qui Gon could feel everything she was feeling. His heightened senses became sharper with each passing moment and he was aware of even the most subtle intricacies of the woman in his arms. He could sense her escalating passion and absorbed it into him, sending her waves of his own desire back to her. Her mind was completely open to him and he knew exactly what she was feeling and thinking. He felt so close to her from this mentally intimate connection, he relished it more than their present physical one. He only wished she could experience it with him.

She climaxed violently; waves and waves of release pulsing through her. The sensation of it pierced into the core of Qui Gon's mind and spun wildly through his body, causing him to quickly follow her.

They collapsed together in a satiated heap, panting and gasping for air. Tia laughed lightly, and kissed Qui Gon's chest. She lay her head down and could hear the pounding of his heart against her ear. He wrapped his arms around her back and squeezed her tightly. He took a deep lungful of air and released a steady gratified moan.

"I've never felt anything more beautiful," he whispered and kissed the top of her head.

Tia peered up at him and sighed. "I can't tell you how many times I have dreamt of this very moment," she said seriously, then smiled devilishly. "Basking in the afterglow with you lying naked and sweaty beside me."

Qui Gon laughed and began rubbing her back, his hands passing slowly from her shoulders to her hips. "I've dreamt of it too," he admitted. "Though I never truly believed it would happen."

Tia kissed him and stroked his hair. She gazed steadily at his face, committing every detail to memory. He looked so handsome and so sexy right now, she wanted to remember him this way forever. It would come in handy if he ever decided to pick a fight with her again. She reached up and trailed her finger down the bridge of his nose.

"I love your nose," she sighed happily. "It's so aristocratic. Where did you get a nose like that?"

Qui Gon smiled. "In a fight. A long time ago. It never properly healed."

Tia leaned forward and kissed it. "Don't ever get it fixed, okay? I love it just the way it is. I love your face. I love your whole body." She suddenly grew very serious. She looked into his eyes sadly and sighed. "I love you, Qui Gon."

He looked back at her with his usual passive expression .

Tia sighed again, frustrated.

"I know it was a mistake. But I just couldn't help myself," she told

him, her eyes filling with unshed tears suddenly.

Qui Gon reached up and cradled her face with his hand. "Is that the mistake you were referring to back at the restaurant?"

Tia nodded reluctantly. "I know Jedi are deeply committed to their diplomatic, nomadic lifestyles, but I guess I didn't know how much it meant to you personally until you started explaining to me about Obi Wan." She paused and sniffed sadly. "I wanted you to love me too even though I knew how wrong it was. I gave Mandie this big speech earlier about falling in love with Obi Wan and how he would only end up leaving her and she'd only make herself miserable because he could never love her in return." Tia sighed heavily. "I should have listened to my own advice."

Qui Gon held her to him and kissed her softly. "I knew, Tia," he said quietly. "I sensed it. We wouldn't have made love if I believed you felt any different about me. But it's all right. "

Tia shook her head. "It's not all right, Qui Gon. How is it all right?"

"I love you too," he whispered.

Time blinked in that moment and was irrevocably changed from that instant on. Tia's jaw slackened and dropped. "Oh, Qui Gon...I'm so sorry," she told him.

He laughed lightly. "There's no need for sympathy, Tia."

She frowned. "As if it weren't bad enough that the remainder of my existence is going to be miserable and empty, now I've gone and made you fall in love with me and condemned your existence too!" She snuggled against him and lay her head on his shoulder with an exasperated sigh. "What are we going to do now?"

Qui Gon eased her off of him and rolled her over on her back. He stretched out on top of her and kissed her deeply. "Everything we have been doing," he said and then smiled tenderly. "If it's all we can do, it will have to be enough." He dotted her neck with soft kisses and trailed them down to her breasts as he suggestively parted her thighs with his legs. Tia grinned up at him, catching his innuendo. She closed her eyes and whimpered contentedly as he began nibbling on her skin. If this was all they could do, perhaps her existence wouldn't be so miserable after all.

In a corner, on the floor of Mandie's room, Obi Wan woke with a start. The disturbing darkness he had felt last night was suddenly looming over him. He looked up to see Corbin, glaring down at him with a blaster aimed at Obi Wan's head.

"What are you doing in here, you little shit?" Corbin hissed.

Mandie stirred in her bed and sat up. She gasped when she saw Corbin with the blaster.

Obi Wan gestured quickly and Force pushed Corbin, sending him hurling

against a wall. In a split second, the young Jedi was on his feet and stretched out his hand, tearing the blaster out of Corbin's grasp. It flew towards him and he calmly plucked it out of the air.

Both Corbin and Mandie stared at him in shock.

Obi Wan now had the blaster pointed at Corbin and adjusted the power to stun.

"Calm down," he told Corbin with unwavering authority. "Would you like to tell me what this is all about before I call security?"

"I'll tell you what this is about!" Corbin said, shaking with anger. He roughly dragged his hand through his long black hair to push it out of his face. "I get shut out of the ship all night because some cretin ordered it sealed before I could get back on. Then when I finally do gain access, I come in here to check on Mandie and find you sleeping in her room! Seems you must have had a cozier night than I did."

Mandie scrambled out of bed and over to Obi Wan's side. "It wasn't like that and you know it!"

"I had the ship sealed last night with good reason," Obi Wan told Corbin calmly.

"You?! I spent the night out on a tarmac because of you?" Enraged, Corbin flew at him again, but Obi Wan used the Force to pin him to the wall. His gaze piercing, he stepped towards Corbin and subtly waved his hand in front of his eyes.

"You will be calm now."

"I will be calm now," Corbin repeated with a deadpan expression.

Obi Wan lowered the blaster and tucked it into his belt. "Good," he said simply. He glanced at Mandie and smiled slightly. Her eyes were wide with wonderment. "Now, if you'll let me explain," Obi Wan continued. "Last night, while in town, someone tried to kidnap Tia. My master thought there might be a possibility that who ever attacked her might come after Mandie as well. To keep her safe, I had Captain Fostey seal the ship for the night." Obi Wan studied Corbin's reaction carefully to this bit of news. He looked appropriately mortified, but Obi Wan felt little emotion surfacing inside him.

"How awful!" he exclaimed. He faced Mandie. "Is she all right?"

Mandie nodded. "I spoke with her. She's fine."

They were interrupted by a soft metallic knocking on the door. Mandie hurried to answer it.

HJK-260 bowed slightly as the door opened before him. "Begging your pardon, Miss, but I've been sent by Captain Fostey to inform you that Miss Tia and Jedi Jinn have arrived back at the ship and we will be departing Istse in one standard hour."

"Thank you HJ," Mandie said with an excited smile. She closed the door as the droid hurried off and turned to face Obi Wan and Corbin once more.

Now Corbin faced Obi Wan. "I understand fully now and I can see you acted accordingly to ensure the safety of my girlfriend."

Something felt different about Corbin, Obi Wan thought. His presence was darker and more sinister than the simple hostility Obi Wan had sensed in him when they had first met. He noticed the bruises purpling his knuckles and the torn sleeve of his coat. There was also a small scratch on his chin which was not there when Obi Wan had seen him last.

Mandie's eyes narrowed. "I'm not your girlfriend anymore," she stated.

Corbin glared quickly at Obi Wan, then nodded in acquiescence at Mandie. When he spoke, his voice was relatively nonchalant. "I see. I actually came to that conclusion some time ago. Hopefully we can remain friends. You must forgive my ill-temper. I did not sleep well last night."

Obi Wan folded his arms across his chest and slipped his hands into the sleeves of his cloak. "What have you been up to?" he asked Corbin quietly.

Corbin gave him another scathing look and half snarled his reply. "I told you, I spent the night outside." He locked his dark eyes on the Jedi, oozing hatred. Obi Wan stared back at him, unperturbed.

Mandie stepped forward. "You owe Obi Wan another apology," she said suddenly.

Corbin pried his eyes off his rival and faced Mandie. He smiled at her sweetly. "I suppose I do." He extended his hand towards Obi Wan so suddenly, the Jedi almost flinched. Obi Wan eyed him warily before shaking his hand. "Forgive my outbursts," Corbin continued. "As I've repeatedly stated, I did not have a pleasant night. Let's just forget about calling security, shall we?"

Obi Wan nodded. He had no proof that Corbin had done anything wrong. Only his sense of it. He was better off letting him go for now. Obi Wan fished Corbin's blaster from his belt and handed it back to him.

Corbin smiled slowly and stepped forward tentatively, taking his weapon. "I'll just be going then." He nodded briefly at Mandie and strode out of the room.

Obi Wan stood thinking, trying to analyze what had been revealed to him about Corbin by his senses. Mandie suddenly grabbed his arm and began hauling him towards the door.

"Come on, Tia and Qui Gon are back! What are you standing there for?" She glanced back at Obi Wan, then stopped short, her eyes growing wide. She stepped closer to him and began examining his neck.

Obi Wan's brow furrowed. "What are you looking at?"

Mandie started to laugh, and propelled him towards the large mirror over her vanity. She reached up and twisted his head to the side and pointed at his neck. "That!"

Obi Wan saw the large purplish-brown mark on the side of his neck. "What is that?"

Mandie peered into the mirror with Obi Wan. "I did that yesterday. Remember? It left a good mark," she told him proudly.

Obi Wan started to shake his head, but then remembered the sweet stinging pain and incredibly arousing sensation Mandie had caused when she had gnawed on his skin. He sighed heavily.

Mandie set about adjusting the collar of his cloak to help conceal it.

"Don't worry about it," Obi Wan said. "If Qui Gon asks, I'll just tell him it was a lightsaber burn."

Qui Gon strode down the hallway to the room he shared with Obi Wan. The ship would be leaving soon, but before it did, he wanted to file an incident report with the local authorities. Then he needed to find Obi Wan and have him confirm the navigational coordinates for Aurelia, check the cargo hold and account for the crates that were to be transported, then he planned to do a thorough search of the ship and question each passenger and crew member who had left the ship last night to see if he sensed anything unusual. He sighed heavily and opened the door to his room. All he really wanted to do was crawl into bed and sleep until they reached Aurelia.

"Master!" Obi Wan called.

Qui Gon turned to see his padawan jogging down the hall towards him. "Hello Obi Wan," he said quietly.

"How's Miss Orman?" Obi Wan asked as he followed Qui Gon into the room.

"She'll be all right. She was more frightened than hurt really."

Obi Wan shook his head. "Did you see anything?"

"No, and I was only able to sense her attacker. I'm not exactly sure that would be considered admissable evidence. But I know I would be able to identify this human if I sensed him again." Qui Gon frowned and put his hands on his hips, his voice low. "I wish we weren't leaving so soon, but maybe by doing so, we'll be leaving the kidnapper back on Istse. Unfortunately, I get the feeling that all is not right on this ship."

"I know what you mean," Obi Wan sighed. "Feelings, strange sensations, disturbances, but nothing tangible to justify them."

Qui Gon peered down at his apprentice. "You sensed something?"

Obi Wan nodded. "Last night, shortly after you contacted me. There was a faint tremor of darkness. It was very unsettling. Then this morning," Obi Wan paused and drew closer to his master. "Corbin Roos showed up in Mandie's room threatening me with a blaster. He feigned jealousy but there was something more malevolent about him suddenly. His presence felt like the disturbance from last night."

"Corbin Roos? The young man we encountered in the hangar?" Obi Wan nodded. "Where is he now?" Qui Gon asked.

Obi Wan frowned. "He left her room. I haven't seen him since. I just have a bad feeling about him."

"Why do you think he threatened you?"

"I'm not really sure, but I know it had nothing to do with Mandie." He paused and sighed heavily. "Master, I ordered the ship sealed last night, but Corbin was angry with me even before I told him that. He wasn't accounted for and he says he spent the night on the tarmac, but I noticed his coat was torn and his hands were bruised and his face was scratched."

Qui Gon stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Interesting to say the least. I believe I should seek out Mr. Roos and see if he seems 'familiar' to me."

Obi Wan's eyes narrowed. "You really think he may be the one who attacked Miss Orman?"

"It adds up, Padawan. I just don't think it was a local. This person had to have been out last night at precisely the same time, had to have known where we were, and had to have known about Tia to the extent of trying to ransom her. If it wasn't him, more than likely it was someone from the ship."

Qui Gon pulled off his cloak and draped it over the foot of his bed then walked over to the water carafe on the table and poured himself a drink. He dropped into the nearest chair with a sigh. His expression was distant and unseeing.

Obi Wan walked slowly over to him. "Are you all right?"

Qui Gon looked over at him and smiled easily. "Yes, why?"

Obi Wan shrugged. "I'm not sure what it is I'm sensing from you, but it doesn't feel...normal."

"Maybe because you can't remember ever sensing in me what I'm feeling right now," Qui Gon told him. "Don't let it trouble you, Obi Wan. I can assure you, I'm just very... relaxed."

Obi Wan stared hard at Qui Gon. "You're beyond relaxed, you're--" He suddenly stopped himself as realization dawned and bowed his head. "Forgive me, Master. It's not my place to question you further about this." He chewed his lower lip for a moment, then turned and started for the door.

"Obi Wan, sit down," Qui Gon quietly commanded. His apprentice turned

slowly, his head still bowed and slid into a chair across from his master's. Qui Gon sighed heavily. Naturally the boy would have sensed something. No, Qui Gon corrected himself mentally, not a boy. A young man, and he deserved to be treated as such. "The last thing I want is for you to feel you can't talk to me about certain things."

"I don't feel that way," Obi Wan countered. "I know I can talk to you."

Qui Gon fixed his eyes on Obi Wan. "Let's clear some things up then," he began softly.

Obi Wan nodded, glancing up briefly. "Is what I'm sensing about you correct then? You and Miss Orman?"

Qui Gon felt a brief twinge of guilt and immediately pushed it away. He nodded slowly before realizing the guilt he had felt was Obi Wan's and not his own. He furrowed his brow, curious as to what his apprentice had done to feel guilty about, then noticed Obi Wan's hand sliding subtly up the side of his neck.

Qui Gon frowned deeply. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

Slowly, Obi Wan began unconsciously rubbing his neck. "When...when you were with Miss Orman...last night, did you feel it was because she hindered your 'better judgment' in a way?"

Qui Gon sighed, resisting the urge to smile. "Perhaps to a certain extent, but for the most part, no." He folded his hands together on top of the table and leaned forward slightly. "If I were to ask you the same question, how would you answer me?"

Obi Wan's eyes shot up to his master's. He dropped his hand from his neck with an exasperated sigh and nodded reluctantly.

Qui Gon leaned slightly to the side to get a better look at what it was his apprentice had tried to conceal. He swallowed down his amusement, sensing the boy's obvious embarrassment.

"I realize now, the truth behind what you had said before regarding 'better judgment'," Obi Wan began to explain. "I was more than a little distracted by Mandie when I was supposed to be watching the cargo. I'm not really sure what happened, but I found it very hard to focus on the cargo with her so close to me."

Qui Gon leaned back. His padawan expected a reprimand, but Qui Gon knew he was in no position to chastise him. Besides, Qui Gon reasoned, Obi Wan was always much harder on himself for his perceived shortcomings than Qui Gon could ever be. He studied his contrite apprentice for a moment, then sighed heavily.

"Obi Wan, you're almost seventeen," he began. "At that age, you most likely have just as many hormones speaking to you as midi-chlorians. It's natural for you to feel the way you do now and I'm fully aware of how difficult it is for you to deal with it sometimes. Just remember, there is a proper time and place for everything. I'm also fully aware," Qui Gon paused for emphasis, "That you are, under normal circumstances, disciplined enough to satisfactorily fulfill a responsibility when it is given to you."

Obi Wan lowered his head. "Yes Master, I am," he replied softly.

Qui Gon folded his arms across his chest. "Very well then," he said quietly. "I know you'll take your duties more seriously next time."

Obi Wan nodded, but Qui Gon noticed he still looked upset.

The Jedi Master frowned. He reached out with the Force to gain insight as to just what his padawan was feeling and was a little surprised to sense an intense curiosity as well as an almost imperceptible trace of envy.

"Obi Wan, listen to me. I want you to be honest with me. You know how Tia and I passed a good portion of the night last night but I'm sensing that there is something concerning that fact that bothers you. Is there anything you want to discuss with me about it?"

Obi Wan finally looked up at Qui Gon. "Master, I'm hardly in a position to discuss such things."

"Does knowing what you do now make you uncomfortable?" Qui Gon continued.

"No, Master." Obi Wan lowered his eyes once more. "And I'm not judging you, I promise. I cannot pass judgment on something I have never experienced for myself. I'm not shocked or really very surprised at all. I know how fond of Miss Orman you are." He looked up slowly and swallowed hard.

"Then what is it, Padawan?" Qui Gon asked gently.

Obi Wan inhaled deeply. "It's nothing really, it's just that...I wonder what it's like. I sense what you're feeling affected you profoundly and I know what you shared with her must have been very personal and very special to you and I'm awed by it."

Qui Gon leaned forward. "Is there anything you want to ask me? I'll try to answer your questions as clearly and truthfully as I can. Just keep in mind, I'm not exactly an expert myself."

"We've had this talk before, Master," Obi Wan said, the corners of his mouth twitching in amusement.

"Yes," Qui Gon agreed. "But you were very young then. I thought perhaps you might not have understood...everything?" The last word was clearly a question.

Obi Wan gazed affectionately at his master. "You were very thorough and very comprehensive, Master," he assured.

Qui Gon sat back and seemed to sigh in relief. He looked over at Obi Wan and smiled. "Then if you're so sure there is no way I can further enlighten you, be off then. You need to confirm the coordinates for Aurelia in the nav computer and I have an incident report to file."

Obi Wan stood up and grinned. "Yes Master."

"I realize it would be a greater risk, but it's our only chance!" Corbin growled into his comlink. "These damnable Jedi are hindering my best efforts. The only way to overtake them is to overwhelm them. There's only two of them, but I can't go at this alone anymore!"

"You're asking us to intercept a ship on a Federation secured trade route," a voice contested strongly.

"I'm not asking!" Corbin seethed. "I'm telling you it's the only way. When are we going to get an opportunity for a take like this again? And a possible ransom fee? It would be worth any risk Federation patrols would pose."

"I thought we agreed the ransom was to be carried out on Istse? What happened there?"

"She got away from me. I couldn't get her to our contact. Then that Jedi found her and there was no getting near her after that," Corbin explained.

"And what about the other girl?"

"I couldn't get to her either. I was locked out of the ship all night and when I went to get her, the other Jedi was there with her."

The static-filled voice cursed in Aurelian. "All right then. We'll intercept the ship just outside of the Verma system. We'll issue a distress signal to get the ship out of hyperspace when it reaches Verma. You just keep the homing device activated. We'll take it from there. Over and out."

Corbin sighed heavily and turned off the comlink. Now all he had to do was stay out of sight of the Jedi until Verma. And by that time, it wouldn't matter if they saw him or not.

Mandie sat across from Tia in the dining area, watching her wolf down a breakfast like she hadn't eaten in days.

"Didn't you eat last night?" Mandie questioned.

Tia nodded. "Umm hmm. We had some food brought to the hotel room from the restaurant. My jaw was still a little sore then and had a hard time chewing and frankly I wasn't very hungry at the time."

Mandie peered at her sister's slightly discolored eye. "You look sore."

Tia dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "No, It doesn't hurt anymore. It was a lot worse yesterday. Qui Gon did something to it and it's been healing right up."

"You're not hurting anymore? You seem a little stiff and you're walking kind of strangely," Mandie continued.

Tia blinked back at her innocently. "Am I? It must have been the way I slept last night." She smiled inwardly as she remembered falling asleep with the Jedi's body draped possessively over hers.

Mandie sat back. "You don't seem too terribly upset by any of this," she observed.

"Upset? I am some, but I'm not going to dwell on it. I have much nicer things to think about now." Tia began licking sauce from her fingers and suddenly smiled as another tantalizing memory from the night before surfaced.

Obviously, Tia didn't want to talk about her attack. Maybe she was having a hard time coming to terms with it. "Where did you get that outfit?" Mandie asked, deciding to change the subject.

Tia sat forward with a smile. "My dress got torn, so Qui Gon let me wear his cloak last night. I didn't have anything else to wear this morning, so I had the shop in the hotel annex to send this up.

Mandie smiled. "He gave you his cloak to wear? That's romantic."

"Yeah, I thought so too. I don't know if he did it to be romantic, however. More along the lines of being pragmatic."

Mandie nodded. "I bet he was. You just couldn't tell. He likes you alot. The way he looks at you sometimes....I can tell."

Tia smiled broadly. "Funny how you would have noticed that, and I didn't. Maybe I thought it was just too much to hope for and refused to see it." She shrugged. "Look, Mandie, about Obi Wan," she said suddenly, fixing her eyes on her sister with a solemn expression. "I was a little hasty before. Warning you off of him the way I did."

Mandie lowered her eyes. "While you were gone, Obi Wan and I had a chance to talk. I think we kind of sorted things out."

Tia sighed. "Good. I'm glad." She leaned back and pushed her tray away from her. "I want you to be happy. And if you think you can be happy with Obi Wan, you shouldn't be afraid to." She smiled encouragingly and slowly stood up. "Come on. Let's go check on the star allees. I've been dying to see them."

Mandie got up and followed her sister out of the dining area.

Obi Wan sat at the nav computer console and nodded to Captain Fostey who in turn nodded to his co-pilot. The coordinates were set and confirmed. The ship shot into hyperspace and soon they would be coming up on the Verma system. Everything was going as planned. The Trade Federation had sent word, authorizing their new course, and assured them the route they were taking now was secured and free of pirate activity. There were no unforeseen complications or circumstances to be concerned about at all, so why did Obi Wan have such a sense of forboding? He frowned and leaned back in his chair,

then turned to face Captain Fostey.

"What kind of defenses does this vessel have?" he asked suddenly.
"Besides shields, I mean. Does it have any weapons at all?"

Captain Fostey peered over at him curiously. "Of course. Considering the cargo we carry. There's four gun turrets on the port side. Two aft." He tried to smile reassuringly. "But don't worry, we haven't ever had to use them."

Obi Wan narrowed his eyes. "But they are in working order? Are they manned?"

Captain Fostey nodded but frowned. "Why the sudden interest in our defenses? Are you aware of something that I'm not?" The Jedi always seemed to be two steps ahead of him. He wouldn't have been surprised if this was one of those times.

Obi Wan sighed. "Only a feeling." He stood up and made his way to the door. He wanted to find Mandie.

Tia entered the access code into the lock on the first crate and stood back. The seal securing the top to the crate powered down with a hum. Anxiously, she and Mandie pushed back the heavy panel and dug into the packaging material. They reached the wrapped crystals at the same time and lifted two stones out for closer examination.

Mandie unwrapped hers first. She smiled, studying it with an appraiser's expert eye. She glanced up at Tia and nodded.

Tia quickly unwrapped her stone next. She held it up so Mandie could see it better.

"What about this one? It's nice and heavy."

"Perfect," Mandie sighed. She reached in the crate and dug out a third crystal. She smiled happily as this stone revealed to her the same qualities as the previous two. "Oh, Tia! We just can't let them get cut up into jewelry. Look, they're just the right size, just the right weight."

Tia nodded. "You're right." She straightened and looked around. "But don't worry. With a shipment of this size, I think there will be more than enough stones to keep the jewelers and the Jedi happy."

Mandie looked down at the sharply chiseled crystals in her hands. She held them closer to the cargo hold's light source. She sighed admiringly when both of the stones refracted the light into several tiny multicolored beams.

"Breathtaking!" an unexpected deep voice suddenly exclaimed from the hold's entryway.

Startled, both Tia and Mandie swung around to see Corbin casually walking towards them. He came up beside Mandie and without bothering to ask her, took one of the crystals from her and held it up to his eyes. A slow smile lit his dark features.

"Blazes, Corbin! You nearly scared the life out of us!" Tia chastised. Mandie inched away from him and frowned.

"This shipment will certainly secure the company's revenue through the next fiscal year," Corbin continued, unperturbed. "This stone alone will bring at least twenty thousand once cut. Maybe more, depending on the current markets."

Mandie glared at him, then snatched the crystal from his hand.

"This stone and every one like it will be cut into focusing crystals," she stated. "You can have the smaller lighter ones for your jewelry."

Corbin sighed heavily, shaking his head. "If you continue to insist on destroying the quality of such exquisite stones in the name of charity, this company will go bankrupt. Is that what you want?"

Tia dismissed the notion with a wave of her hand. "Not very likely, Corbin, dear. We can afford to put aside a few selected crates for Mandie's 'charity.' This company has been taking and taking. It's time to give something back."

Corbin sighed. "And to such a worthy cause too," he grumbled. "Stockpiling the Temple arsenal."

"Oh you're just peeved because the Jedi won't let you go to Dorvan," Mandie shot back.

"More than you know," Corbin admitted smoothly. "But I'm getting over it."

The notification signal on the cargo hold's intercom panel began blinking. Tia stepped over to it to answer the call.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Miss Orman, you had better come up here. We're receiving a distress signal from a suspended Aurelian G-2 ship just outside the Verma sector."

Tia's brow furrowed. "I'll be right there. Notify Qui Gon and have him meet me on the bridge." Tia walked back over to Mandie. "Come on. We can check out the crystals later."

Mandie nodded. She quickly began placing the stones back inside the crate, then resealed the panel and locked it.

"Wait!" Tia yelped. She held up the large stone she had been holding in her hand the whole time. "You forgot about this one."

Mandie frowned and started to unlock the crate, but in her haste, she messed up the combination to the lock and had to try opening it again.

"Oh never mind," Tia said, pocketing the stone. "We had just better go." She turned and then gasped sharply.

Mandie whirled around and saw Corbin, his blaster drawn and trained

on Tia. Mandie rushed to her side and grasped her hand.

"You're going all right, but not where you think," Corbin growled. He gestured left. "Move, both of you."

Tia and Mandie exchanged glances before starting off in the direction Corbin had indicated.

"What the hell is this all about?!" Tia growled.

"Corbin, what do you think you're doing?" Mandie asked, her voice quivering slightly from anger and fear.

Corbin impatiently pushed them forward. "Very simple, ladies. I need to put you both somewhere safe and secure until my distress signaling pals can get here. I don't want either of you bothering them while they relieve you of your cargo. And I definitely don't want you sidling up to those Jedi before I can get you off the ship."

Tia's eyes grew wide. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Off the ship? What are you talking about?" Mandie demanded.

Corbin turned his dark eyes on her and smiled cruelly. "I'm so relieved we broke up before all this, because it would have definitely put a damper on our relationship if we hadn't. It also makes what I'm about to do a lot easier."

Mandie noticed they were coming up to one of the ship's escape pods. She glanced up at Tia and then back at the pod. Tia warily eyed the sealed hatch of the pod as they drew closer.

"If you think you're putting us in there, you've got another thing coming!"

Corbin laughed humorlessly. "And you are not in a position to make threats, Tia dear. There's no big, bad Jedi here to save you this time. You have to admit, I was doing pretty good until he came after you last night."

Tia's jaw slackened and dropped. She stared over at him as though she had never truly seen him before.

Corbin bowed slightly, tauntingly.

"Yes, last night, that was yours truly," he stated, leering. "I couldn't believe my luck when you came out of that restaurant without him." He straightened and laughed at her mortified expression. "You may as well know, I was also responsible for the untimely disappearance of your navigator and first officer. I had everything planned out. See, you weren't actually supposed to have been kidnapped until we were attacked near Dorvan. But, as you know, there was that slight change in plans there and my partners in crime decided Istse would have to do." He grimaced and sighed heavily. "Well, then there was another change in plans and now you're being kidnapped outside Verma during this impending siege. All I have to do is make it easy for my pirate friends to take you."

Mandie stepped up to him. "You actually think the Jedi are going to just let you and your 'pirate friends' waltz off this ship with us?"

"And the star allees," Corbin added. "I know you two think these Jedi are some kind of invincible warriors, but you have to remember, there are only two of them and forty of my men. I think the odds will be in our favor. The Jedi are going to be far too occupied at first to rescue you. Then they'll be dead."

Tia lowered her eyes and chewed her lip savagely, her mind racing. She plunged her hands into the pockets of her coat, feeling very cold. Her hand hit something sharp and hard and she remembered the stone from the crate. An idea occurred to her and she glanced over at Mandie.

Mandie was huddled close to her older sister. She was shaking her head in disbelief. "Corbin, please, don't do this," she pleaded.

"Why not? I don't want you anymore. That scrawny child-Jedi can have you. Though I have to admit, I found it more than a little insulting that you would choose something like that over me." Corbin leaned over and began opening the escape pod hatch with his free hand. He waved the blaster he held back and forth from Tia to Mandie. "Enough talk, ladies. Time to get in the pod."

Tia slowly edged away from Mandie. Mandie looked over at her curiously, wondering if maybe she was going to make a run for it.

Tia shook her head. "I don't think so, Corbin. I tend to get claustrophobic in tight places like that," she said and smiled sweetly. Her hand suddenly flew out of her pocket, forcefully hurling the stone she had been holding at Corbin's face. It struck his forehead with a loud crack and fell to the floor with a thud.

Reflexively, Corbin fired his blaster but the shot impacted well away from Tia and Mandie into the wall behind them. For a split second, Corbin looked back at Tia amazed. Then he began to sway, his dark eyes losing their focus.

"And this is for last night," Tia continued angrily. She hauled back her fist, swinging with all her might, punching him soundly in the jaw, making her knuckles crack.

Corbin swayed even more and teetered back a few steps.

Mandie sprang forward, recovering from her own shock and seized Corbin's blaster, wrenching it from his hand.

"And this is for this morning!" Mandie said through her teeth. She flipped the blaster around in her hand and smacked Corbin as hard as she could on the top of his head with the grip. With that, Corbin finally crumpled to the floor in an unconscious heap.

Tia and Mandie exchanged awed looks and began to laugh in a giddy relief.

"Quick, let's stash him in the pod for now. We've got to warn Qui Gon and the captain about that distress signal," Tia said, already

hauling Corbin's limp form over to the pod.

Mandie busied herself opening the hatch. "What a slime," she sputtered indignantly. "I can't believe I ever liked him."

"Never mind that now!" Tia told her. "Grab his legs and pull."

Once Corbin was safely sealed in the escape pod, Tia locked it from the outside and secured it to the ship. She turned quickly and dashed to the intercom panel on the wall only to find it a blackened melted mess. She frowned deeply and looked over at Mandie. "Corbin shot the intercom," she reported. "We're going to have to get to the bridge and fast."

Mandie tucked Corbin's blaster into her belt and grinned. "Let's go!"

Using his sense of Mandie's presence as a guide and recognizing the direction he was going, Obi Wan knew she was in the cargo hold. He just needed to see her and reassure himself that she was all right. He couldn't shake the strange darkness he felt and wanted to know that whatever it was he sensed had nothing to do with her.

The Force began to stir in him, however. It was that same disturbance he had felt from Corbin Roos. Obi Wan quickened his pace.

The darkness deepened. Fear suddenly pulsed through him. Confusion and anger. He sensed Tia. Shock? Disbelief. He started to run.

No, no, no, he chanted mentally, trying to focus on Mandie. She was frightened and very angry. Something, someone with her, was the center of these emotions. Corbin was the only logical conclusion. He ran faster.

His heart was beating so hard, his ears were beginning to pound and his rapid breathing didn't seem to be able to keep up with his blood's demand for air.

If you hurt her, if you even touch her....

He realized his own fear for Mandie was amplifying the anxiety he sensed and struggled to rein in his emotions. He knew he needed to calm down and clear his mind. He gathered the Force to him and centered on slowing his heart rate. The Force began to flow into him, filling him with a clearer analysis of the emotions and opening his mind to a more precise image of their source.

Suddenly the ship lurched backwards sharply, causing Obi Wan to veer sideways, temporarily thrown off balance. He recognized the sound of the ship's hyperdrive engines powering down and the sublight engines shifting. He staggered forward a couple of steps, regaining his footing and steadily increased his speed until he was running full tilt once more.

He quickly pushed aside the questions that surfaced as to why they had come out of lightspeed, trying to stay focused on Mandie's presence. He suddenly skidded to a halt. In the course of his distraction with the ship's engines, something had changed about her.

He stretched out with the Force, his mind struggling to interpret the meaning behind the shifting of emotions, then drew it into himself, gathering his sense of her back to him.

He was surprised to discover that she was closer to him than he had first thought and rapidly getting closer. Something was still wrong, however even though the fear he sensed in her now had changed in its composition. He could also feel ripples of the same fear in Tia who had to be near her.

Now he could hear footsteps. Someone running. He began to walk towards the sound, cautiously peering around a corner. He was surprised to see Mandie and Tia running towards him.

"Obi Wan! Thank goodness!" Mandie hailed upon seeing him. She increased her speed and passed her sister, rushing to him. Obi Wan barely had enough time to properly brace himself before she flew into his arms and hugged him in a crushing embrace. "Oh, am I glad to see you!" she gasped and began covering his face with kisses. He returned her kisses with equal enthusiasm, so relieved to find her well, despite everything he had felt earlier.

"What's going on?" he panted finally. Before Mandie could answer, Tia caught up to them and snagged Mandie with an outstretched arm, dragging her away from him.

"Come on!" she hissed. "There will be time enough for that kind of stuff later!"

Mandie seized Obi Wan's hand and hauled him after her.

"We're too late!" Mandie exclaimed. "They've already cut to sublight engines."

"We have got to get to the bridge!" Tia half insisted, half explained. She glanced over at Obi Wan. "That distress signal is a trap!"

Obi Wan spared a startled look at her. "What? What distress signal?"

"They're pirates!" Mandie informed. "Corbin set up some kind of a trap!"

"Where's Qui Gon?" Tia asked.

Obi Wan shook his head. "I don't know." He quickly reached for his comlink and yanked it off his belt.

The ship was an Aurelian F-Class G-2. Qui Gon studied the vessel on the bridge viewscreen with a deepening sense of unease. It hung dark and suspended; tilted slightly as if powerless and damaged somehow, and apparently malfunctioning.

Captain Fostey continued trying to raise the stricken ship's crew to no avail. The only response was the distress signal, locked onto their frequency and set to repeat itself over and over.

Captain Fostey sighed and looked over at the Jedi. "Still no reply," he informed.

Qui Gon was so submerged into his own thoughts, he didn't respond. The Force was charged with an ever-darkening array of sensations. He struggled to wade through it all to reach some kind of understanding, but all he could sense was something was wrong. He turned from the viewscreen with a heavy sigh.

"Didn't you say Miss Orman was on her way here?" he questioned Captain Fostey.

The captain nodded. "She said to have you meet her here, Master Jinn."

Qui Gon shook his head slowly. He took two steps towards the exit, then glanced back at the viewscreen. "Continue trying to raise their crew," he said quietly, then turned sharply and strode off the bridge.

Where are you, Tia? he thought to himself. He drew the Force into himself, searching. It was clouded with anxiety and fear. It startled him to think that focusing on Tia was making him feel such things. He lengthened his stride and centered on Obi Wan. Where was he now? He called to his padawan mentally, sifting through the swirling feelings around him for any sort of reply.

A sense of anxiety hit the Jedi Master again. A confused panic of sorts. Qui Gon stopped walking, and closed his eyes, concentrating. The Force suddenly surged in a tempest of darkness, whipping through him with an intense energy. He recognized the amplified senses as being projected by Obi Wan.

Qui Gon immediately reached for his comlink, but before he could say anything, he heard Obi Wan's voice.

"Obi Wan! Where are you?" Qui Gon demanded.

"Master! The signal is a trap!" Obi Wan exclaimed.

Qui Gon's heart sunk. He turned on his heel and started back towards the bridge. "Where's Tia and Mandie?"

"With me. We're on our way to the bridge."

Qui Gon allowed himself a brief respite of relief upon hearing that. "Obi Wan, stay with them."

"Yes Master."

Qui Gon returned the comlink to his belt as he reached the door to the bridge. He heard an explosion and suddenly the ship rocked violently. Qui Gon was thrown into the wall across the hallway. The lights flickered briefly and then an alarm started wailing. The Jedi climbed to his feet and dashed through the door.

"Shields up!" Captain Fostey barked to the bridge personnel. He turned as he saw Qui Gon and gestured at the viewscreen. "They just fired at us!" he exclaimed with an incredulous expression.

Qui Gon merely nodded. He gazed out at the G-2. Its lights were on, its engines fired, and it was moving, coming directly towards them. Qui Gon saw bursts of red energy streaking from its turrets under the hull. There was another explosion and the Decipher pitched sideways slightly and fired back at the G-2.

"Pirates," Qui Gon pronounced knowingly. "We need to get out of here, fast."

Captain Fostey gave the Jedi an exasperated look. "Master Jinn, this ship cannot outrun a G-2. It's a much faster F-Class then we are."

Qui Gon frowned. "It can in lightspeed," he said, feeling like he was stating the obvious, but he had a bad feeling the captain was about to tell him something concerning the hyperdrive he didn't particularly want to hear.

"It was the hyperdrive they targeted first," Captain Fostey relayed. "It took a direct hit."

Qui Gon groaned inwardly. "Can you reach the Verman authorities? Or the Trade Federation?" he asked.

"Negative," Captain Fostey seethed. "The distress signal that's locked onto our frequency is also jamming it."

"Try another frequency," the Jedi suggested.

"We did. The transmission is not strong enough to reach Verma, let alone the Trade Federation." Captain Fostey shook his head and sighed heavily. "I'm going to have to shut down. We can't risk any further damage to the ship."

Qui Gon turned back to the viewscreen. The G-2 was almost directly over them now. In a few more minutes, it would reach the Decipher. There was nothing left to do but wait to be boarded.

"After I leave, close these blast doors," Qui Gon ordered. "Don't let anyone on or off the bridge."

Captain Fostey nodded. "As you wish, Master Jinn."

Obi Wan spied Qui Gon at the other end of the hall. The Jedi Master was walking calmly but purposefully towards them. Obi Wan slowed to a walk, using the opportunity to catch his breath. Tia and Mandie pulled up beside him. Qui Gon stopped in front of them and addressed his apprentice.

"The bridge is sealed," Qui Gon said quietly. "The hyperdrive is damaged and we're about to be boarded."

Obi Wan merely nodded acknowledgment. Tia and Mandie exchanged worried looks.

Qui Gon turned slightly and focused on Tia, using the Force to reassure himself that his eyes were not deceiving him and that she really was all right. Besides being too winded to speak, she seemed

fine. Qui Gon reached out and lightly touched her shoulder.

"Take Mandie to your room and wait there," he told her, but Tia was already shaking her head.

"This is my ship and it's my duty to defend it," she panted. She stared up at him defiantly.

Qui Gon tilted his head back, looking down at her with contention. "I don't have time to argue about this. There's nothing we can do to defend the ship at this point. If we resist them, there will be lives lost needlessly. They have the advantage now. In order for us to regain the upper hand, it will be necessary to resort to more subtle tactics." His hand moved to brush her face, his expression softened considerably, and he leaned closer to her. "I want you to wait in your room so I'll know where you are. Please do this for me, Tia. I need to know you'll be safe."

Tia dropped her eyes with a heavy sigh and nodded in acquiescence.

Gratefully, Qui Gon sighed as well. "Now, do you have access to weapons of any kind? Anything you can use to defend yourselves if need be?"

Mandie stepped forward and pulled Corbin's blaster from her belt. "I have this!"

Qui Gon raised his brow curiously, but did not pursue the questions that surfaced in his mind. He nodded. "Good. Don't let anyone into your room, understand?"

Mandie and Tia both nodded.

Qui Gon turned back to Obi Wan. "The pirates are positioned directly over us. They'll likely gain access through the main hull. This means they'll have to go through two levels before reaching the cargo. That may give us just enough time."

"Corbin said there'll be about forty of them," Mandie informed.

"Corbin?"

"Yes Master," Obi Wan confirmed. "Apparently, we've been set up."

Qui Gon sighed heavily. "Where is he now?"

Tia licked her lips apprehensively. "Mandie and I locked him in one of the escape pods in the lower level. He's stuck there until someone lets him out."

"He was going to lock us in there, but we fought him off," Mandie stated proudly.

Qui Gon and Obi Wan looked at each other, then simultaneously faced the two women.

"Corbin told us that not only are those pirates planning on stealing

the crystals, they are planning on taking us as well and holding us for a ransom," Tia related with a disgusted expression. "Corbin also humbly confessed to being my abductor last night."

Qui Gon's eyes narrowed and darkened and locked on Tia's. He took a deep steadying breath. "Go now," he told her quietly. "No one is taking you anywhere." He held her gaze for a moment, then stepped around her. "Padawan, it's time. Come."

Tia suddenly seized Qui Gon's arm, fear clouding her features.

"Lover," she whispered. Her bottom lip began to tremble as tears welled in her eyes. "Please be careful."

Qui Gon leaned forward and softly kissed her forehead. Tia hugged his neck before releasing him and stepping back. He nodded slowly.

Mandie faced Obi Wan. "May the Force be with you," she sighed, her own eyes rapidly watering as the realization of what was about to unfold began to sink in.

"You be careful too," Obi Wan told Mandie. He started off after Qui Gon, then turned around and blew her a kiss.

The pirates were cutting through a door to the upper deck of the Decipher with a laser saw.

A security force compiled of crewmen and guards had taken cover along the walls of the main passageway. The lights in the entryway flickered and dimmed as the Jedi came up behind the crewmen and crouched down.

"They are certainly taking their time," Obi Wan observed.

"They believe they have the time to take," Qui Gon replied, looking around and frowning at the malfunctioning lights. "Their plans were well constructed. They have the advantage. They see no cause for haste."

"Perhaps they believe Corbin Roos will be waiting to welcome them on board," Obi Wan muttered, his dislike for Corbin seeping into his tone.

"Perhaps," Qui Gon agreed. He focused on the jagged trail of the laser saw as it continued lazily cutting through the door.

Obi Wan turned to more directly face his master. "So what's on the agenda?" he asked, anxious to hear Qui Gon's plan.

Qui Gon glanced over at him. "I believe our situation calls for a little stealth. Something which will give us the advantage or at least put us on the same level again."

Obi Wan was unable to grasp his meaning. "What exactly?"

Qui Gon sighed. "Sabotage." He gestured forward. "First and foremost,

we will have to disable their weapons."

Obi Wan looked up at the door. He nodded. "We'll also need to disable their engines so they can't pursue us."

"Yes, but I don't particularly want to flee from them entirely. If we can get them to follow us, maybe we can get them close enough to Verma to have them intercepted."

"Disable their hyperdrive then?" Obi Wan asked, his brow furrowing thoughtfully.

Qui Gon nodded. "That distress signal is jamming our communication system. We'll need to stop it to clear our frequencies."

Obi Wan nodded, but felt a little skeptical. "Our success will rely heavily on a lot of minor details going our way, Master."

"We'll just have to make them go our way then," Qui Gon told him.

"How are we going to get onto their ship?" Obi Wan asked after a long moment of silence.

Qui Gon pointed. "Through the door," he replied as if it should have been obvious.

Obi Wan gave him a quick exasperated look. Qui Gon gazed back at him with a hint of a smile softening his expression.

"Once the pirates are through the door," Qui Gon went on to explain, "they will be thinking our forces will be in front of them, retreating inward. They won't be expecting anyone to advance into their hull at that point and certainly, not through the door. It's a slight advantage, but it is one we can use."

"What about the crewmen? Shouldn't we try to hold the pirates back with them?" Obi Wan gestured in front of him at the waiting armed forces.

Qui Gon shook his head. "These are trained security personnel. They'll no doubt hold their own. We'll be more effective on the inside."

The metal of the damaged door began to moan in protest as the pirates began applying pressure to it from the other side. Both Jedi sensed the tension in the entryway increase to an almost tangible level.

"Come on," Qui Gon said, tugging at his apprentice's cloak. He activated his lightsaber and began moving up the entryway passage.

Obi Wan crept after him, drawing his lightsaber. Its white-blue blade cast an eerie glow in the dimly lit passage.

Suddenly the pirates broke through. They began pouring into the entryway, quickly filling it with blaster fire and smoke, inhibiting visibility. In a matter of moments, Obi Wan couldn't see Qui Gon or the door anymore. He continued on, drawing from the Force and letting

it guide him. Without thinking, he began catching blasts with his lightsaber and throwing them back at the pirates.

Qui Gon didn't even appear to be paying attention to the barrage of blaster fire that came his way. He continued slinking up the hall passage, occasionally swatting away any blasts that came too close. Just as casually, Qui Gon brought his saber down in a sweeping arc through the darkness. A pirate fell to the floor in two pieces.

Out of the acrid smoke, another pirate materialized in front of Obi Wan and shot at him several times. The young Jedi deflected each blast back at the pirate, who also went down. Obi Wan spun around just in time to catch another blast with his lightsaber, this time sending it up and out of harm's way. He realized he and Qui Gon were in the very middle of this shootout and had to deflect the friendly fire as well as any hostile fire that came too close.

Obi Wan had caught up to Qui Gon and could see the jagged hole in the door left by the pirates. The Jedi Master advanced quickly, startling two pirates who had just emerged from the hole. Before they could raise their blasters, Qui Gon Force pushed the closest one, who in turn knocked over the second pirate. The Jedi Master leapt over them as they tried to untangle themselves from each other, then turned, stretching slightly to the side, catching a blast from a crewmen's rifle and angled it down at one of the pirates on the floor. Obi Wan jumped forward as the surviving pirate fired at Qui Gon, swinging his saber, catching the laser bolt with the very tip, but away from his master. Before the pirate could fire again, Qui Gon pierced him through the chest.

Sensing the approach of more pirates, Qui Gon flew over to the side of the door and motioned Obi Wan to the opposite side. Three pirates raced through the hole in the door, firing blindly into the entryway and were swiftly cut down. Qui Gon leaned over and peered through the door. Seemingly satisfied that the way was clear, Qui Gon deactivated his lightsaber and carefully stepped inside. Obi Wan batted away a few more stray blasts, then darted after his master.

Qui Gon was moving fast. By the time Obi Wan caught up to him again, the Jedi Master had drawn the attention of four more pirates. Obi Wan stayed back out of sight, his senses honed and alert for possible danger. It was a stand-off of sorts. The pirates were armed, but seemed to regard Qui Gon as an inconsequential threat. He had calmly approached them unarmed and alone.

Aurelians, Obi Wan thought, taking in the pirates' excessively long hair and sharp, chiseled features. They are robbing their own people. They are depleting their own planet's economy for personal gain. An idea suddenly occurred to him. Qui Gon wanted the pirates to follow them to Verma, to hand them over to the authorities there. But Verma was a system that couldn't possibly understand the significant damage that these kind of pirate raids could cause to Aurelia's trade. If they could get the pirates to follow them to Aurelia, the government there would surely prosecute them to the full extent of their law. Obi Wan grinned, suddenly realizing a surefire way to get the pirates to go to Aurelia all by themselves.

"Who are you?" one of the pirates suddenly demanded, taking a small step towards Qui Gon, and raising his blaster in a show of bravado.

"My name is Qui Gon Jinn."

The other three pirates edged closer as well.

"What are you doing here?" a second questioned sharply.

Qui Gon straightened to his full height. His hand disappeared inside his robe. He could feel that Obi Wan was itching to attack behind him, but he sent his padawan waves of reassurance through the Force. To the pirates, he carefully projected his demeanor as the epitome of serenity and confidence. "I'm here to stop you," he answered simply.

The pirates began to laugh mockingly, albeit nervously, not quite sure what to make of this strangely compelling but clearly delusional man.

"I think you had better come with us to see the captain," the first pirate said. He waved his blaster at the Jedi and motioned him forward.

Qui Gon raised his brow. "I will comply only if it suits my purpose," he stated in a businesslike tone. "Where is your captain?"

"On the bridge," the pirate informed. "That's where you're going right now."

Qui Gon nodded. "Very well. I'll go with you then."

The pirates laughed again. "Hopefully they're all this easy," the second pirate informed the other. "Especially those women." The laughter increased along with their confidence.

Obi Wan could feel Qui Gon bristle, but the Jedi Master retained his outwardly passive appearance. He let the pirates push him roughly forward, towards the bridge. Obi Wan had to keep reminding himself that Qui Gon knew exactly what he was doing and the Jedi Master could very well take care of himself. He could still feel ripples of reassurance Qui Gon sent and tried to remain calm. He also knew he and Qui Gon needed to get to the bridge in order to carry out their roles as saboteurs. If they had an armed escort, all the better.

"Lover," Mandie was saying. "You called him 'Lover' I heard you." Mandie sat on the edge of her bed, watching Tia, Corbin's blaster resting in her lap.

Tia was pacing, wringing her hands, and occasionally swearing to herself. "Yea, so? I got a little emotional, okay?"

Mandie shook her head. "Are you denying it then?"

Tia stopped pacing long enough to face her sister. "Denying what? What are you talking about?"

"I'm not a kid anymore," Mandie argued. "Usually if you call someone 'Lover' it means he is." She frowned and gazed up at Tia angrily.

"And after you gave me this big speech about how I should avoid getting involved with a Jedi at all costs. I almost really messed things up with Obi Wan because of what you said. You are one for the books, I tell you."

Tia sighed and bowed her head. "I'm really sorry, Sweetheart. I was glad to hear that you and Obi Wan worked things out. I know, I know, I should have practiced what I preached. I wanted to, I really did. It's just sometimes things happen and we don't have as much control over them as we thought we did." She looked up apologetically. "Forgive me?"

Mandie nodded, smiling easily. "I forgive you. I know you were only trying to protect me." She suddenly rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "So...tell me everything! I want all the juicy details!"

Tia's eyes widened in feigned shock. "I will not!" she stated and resumed pacing.

"Oh come on," Mandie pleaded. "It would sure make all this waiting easier."

Tia shook her head. "I know. I'm going stir crazy just waiting like this," she told her sister. "Who knows what's going on up there. The ship could be swarming with pirates, carting off the crystals, and shooting everyone in sight." She cursed again. "And we just sit here."

Mandie's hand tightened on the blaster she held. "The Jedi aren't going to let them cart off our cargo," she said with the utmost confidence.

Tia swung around and began pacing in the opposite direction. "Why did I promise him we would just stay here? What was I thinking?"

Mandie opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by a frantic metallic tapping on their door. She was immediately on her feet, blaster trained and ready. Tia stalked over to the door and leaned her ear against it, listening. She looked over at Mandie, baffled.

"Do you really think the pirates would knock first?"

Mandie frowned and shrugged. "Ask who it is."

Tia leaned against the door again. "Who...who's there?"

"It's me, Miss Tia, HJK-260. I've been looking for you."

Mandie and Tia sighed collectively. Tia opened the door and quickly pulled the droid inside. "Not so loud, HJ, we don't want anyone to know where we are," Tia informed him.

"Oh, forgive me, I'll adjust my volume levels," HJ offered. Now when he spoke he was barely audible. "Captain Fostey summoned me. I was sent to find you," he explained. "He sends his regrets that he is unable to attend to this in person but he is sealed on the bridge."

"What, HJ? What is he unable to attend to?" Mandie pushed.

"It came to the attention of Captain Fostey that we are experiencing a power drain. As a result of the direct hit the ship suffered earlier, a generator on the lower level has malfunctioned and is causing the lights to go off on certain parts of the main deck, including the bridge. To compensate, the remaining two generators are pulling power from what they deem presently unnecessary sources such as the trash compactor and the defense shields. He has tried to no avail to convince the generators that the defense shields are a little more important than the lights at the moment but someone will need to manually override the generators and keep all power possible on the shields."

Tia closed her eyes and shook her head in disbelief. "Oh of all things," she began. "Now this." She turned to face Mandie, who was shaking her head.

"Qui Gon told us to stay here," Mandie reminded, resuming her seat on the bed.

Tia frowned and turned back to HJ. "Do we really need the shields now? It's not like they're still firing at us."

HJ stepped over to her. "The captain believes it is possible the pirates currently raiding the ship might fiendishly resort to attempted disintegration after transferring the cargo to their own vessel. That way, there will be no one to accuse them of any wrongdoing and they will be free to raid again."

Tia began pacing again, chewing her lip savagely. "Why me? Isn't there anyone else available?"

HJ shook his head. "I regret to inform you, there is no one else capable. The captain did send his apologies, but felt it was important enough to have you address the problem."

Tia glanced at Mandie helplessly.

"Qui Gon told us to stay here!" Mandie stated emphatically. "We can't go venturing all over the ship with pirates everywhere waiting to nab us. And if they don't kill us, Qui Gon will."

"He's not going to have much to kill if we all get disintegrated!" Tia shot back. She sighed heavily and walked over to where Mandie sat. "You stay here. There's no sense in both of us risking pirates and the wrath of the Jedi."

"Oh no," Mandie said, climbing to her feet. "I'm going with you. Besides, I have the blaster. You're going to need me along."

Tia opened the door and cautiously peered out. "All right, but stay close. We'll go right to the generators and come right back." She stepped outside and waved Mandie over.

"Miss Tia, will you be requiring my assistance in your endeavor?" HJ asked.

"No, thanks HJ. But if any strangers ask you where we are, you think you saw us on the upper main deck, got it?" Tia informed.

HJ nodded. "Yes Miss Tia. Upper main deck."

Tia smiled slightly. "Come on Mandie. Let's go look for trouble."

Qui Gon subtly glanced over at his apprentice before disappearing onto the bridge of the pirate ship. Obi Wan stayed as far back as he could without losing sight of his master and the four pirates accompanying him. Obi Wan had managed to follow them all the way to the bridge without being detected. Now he would just have to wait. He knew he would be able to sense if Qui Gon needed him, so he decided the best course of action would be to continue to avoid detection and take advantage of the element of surprise when the time came.

Upon entering the bridge, Qui Gon looked around, noting the layout, the design, and the function of each station. There were two somewhat official-looking pirates, one at the communications console and the other draped casually over a high backed chair. Qui Gon was sure that was their captain. He was stocky with long gray hair and no front teeth. He wore numerous medals on his uniform that he no doubt stole from some far more deserving officer during some other raid. There were also two armed pirates who stood unmoving on either side of the bridge along the walls. Qui Gon took in as much detail as he could before the pirate behind him pushed him forward and over to the gray-haired Aurelian with no front teeth. The pirate addressed the man as Captain Kadrata.

"Who's this one then?" Kadrata lisped.

"We don't know. We found him walking around on C deck as if he didn't have a care in the world. Claims he's here to stop us, though," the pirate explained.

"Is that so?" Kadrata asked Qui Gon. "And how do you intend to do that, my lofty friend?"

Qui Gon folded his arms across his chest, slipping his hands into the sleeves of his cloak. "Despite what you may think, I am not your prisoner. I came here of my own free will. You should know that I still fully intend to halt this criminal activity you and your crew are presently engaged in."

Kadrata and the four pirates around him dissolved in laughter. Qui Gon merely sighed and waited for them to regain their composure before continuing.

"Your plan will not succeed," the Jedi warned them formally. "If you were wise, you would surrender to me now. Failure to do so would only result in your imminent death."

Kadrata didn't find this statement quite so amusing. He rose out of his chair and began slowly walking around Qui Gon with an angry expression.

"Just who do you think you are?" Kadrata spat. "Nobody is going to surrender to the likes of you and if anybody's going to be dying, it'll be you, my friend, and soon." He turned to the nearest pirate.

"Get him out of here. See if he's any use to us information-wise, then take him below and waste him."

"All right you, let's go." The pirate standing behind Qui Gon sharply jabbed the end of his blaster into the middle of the Jedi Master's back.

Qui Gon spun around and seized the pirate's wrist, twisting it in such a way, the pirate howled and dropped the blaster before falling to his knees in pain. Kadrata and the other pirates on the bridge froze, momentarily awestruck. Qui Gon locked his eyes on the captain while calmly maintaining his crushing hold on the pirate's wrist.

"You were warned," Qui Gon told him. He turned his arm slightly and the stricken pirate flipped over on his back, screaming as his wrist snapped.

"Kill him! Kill him!" Kadrata ordered.

All five pirates began shooting at Qui Gon but he had already drawn his lightsaber and was deflecting each blast back at them. One by one the pirates became overcome by their own blaster fire.

Kadrata turned and raced for the exit, dodging bodies and laser blasts. Obi Wan suddenly leapt in, swinging his lightsaber at the stray blasts streaking towards him. Kadrata shrieked and ducked, narrowly avoiding being beheaded. He threw himself on the floor, and cowered there.

Obi Wan made his way to Qui Gon's side and joined him in deflecting away the blaster fire until it stopped suddenly. He noticed one of the pirates running into the hall as another called for reinforcements over the ship's intercom. Kadrata was still huddled on the floor. Obi Wan started to pursue the fleeing pirate but Qui Gon called him back. The Jedi Master walked over to a short-haired pirate summoning help, and tapped the console with the tip of his lightsaber. The pirate jumped back as sparks and bits of debris came flying up at him. He stood back, looking around at the injured and dead pirates scattered on the floor and then looked up at Qui Gon fearfully.

"I'm unarmed," he told the Jedi. "Please, don't kill me. I just run the communications board. That's all. Please, believe me."

Qui Gon nodded and lowered his lightsaber. He gestured at Obi Wan to bring the captain over to him.

"Get up," Obi Wan told Kadrata. "My master wishes to speak with you."

Kadrata looked up, startled by Obi Wan's choice of words. "Master?" At first he thought perhaps the boy was a slave. Then he looked over at Qui Gon, then back at Obi Wan, taking in the similar appearance, and began to recall hearing something once about long robes and strange, sword-like weapons. He began cursing and shaking his head. "You're the Jedi Knights aren't you?" He didn't wait for an acknowledgement. He angrily jumped to his feet and over to where the pirate with the broken wrist lay. He began calling him every derogatory term he could think of.

"Idiots! Roos told us there were Jedi on board!" Kadrata continued angrily, addressing all the pirates whether they were dead or not. "Didn't any of you bother to check it out?"

"We were going to check it out, I swear!," the injured pirate gasped, trying to crawl away from his irate superior. "We were told the Jedi were always with the women. That's what Roos said! " "Worthless, the lot of you," Kadrata hissed and snatched up the pirate's discarded blaster and shot him.

Qui Gon was in front of Kadrata in the blink of an eye. "Drop the blaster!" the Jedi ordered. "Drop it now." He jabbed the point of his lightsaber perilously close to the captain's chest.

Kadrata promptly blanched and flung the blaster aside. Disgustedly, he stormed over to his chair and threw himself into it.

Obi Wan exchanged looks with Qui Gon. Qui Gon stepped over to the captain.

"If you will cooperate with us, we will spare you as well. If you at any time threaten my life or that of my apprentice, we will not hesitate to defend ourselves. Do you understand this?" the Jedi Master began in a tone that left little room for argument. He slowly lowered his lightsaber.

Kadrata glared up at him, then spat off to the side of his chair on the floor. "I'm the one who's threatened here and just what do you have in mind as far as cooperating?"

Qui Gon locked his eyes on the Aurelian and sighed. "All you need to do is sit there, and don't interfere with anything. Agreed?"

Kadrata frowned. "Depends. What are you going to do?"

"Nothing you haven't already done to us," Obi Wan told him. He began searching the bridge, going from one console to another. "Master, here's the controls relaying the distress signal." He began twirling his lightsaber around in his hand restlessly.

Qui Gon nodded. The young Jedi flipped his weapon around, holding it upside down over the control panel, then brought it down, slowly drilling through the console. It sizzled and hissed, then sparked wildly and began smoking as its metal and wires melted into one blackened glob. Obi Wan deactivated his lightsaber and walked over to where Qui Gon stood.

Kadrata's eyes widened. "Sufferin' hell! You didn't have to do that! I would've had Sagev shut the thing down if you'd only asked." He gestured at the short-haired pirate.

Qui Gon faced Kadrata. He bowed slightly. "I apologize then for the needless destruction of your ship," he told him with a definite lack of sincerity. He looked around. "Since you prefer us to ask first, I thought you would like to know that we also mean to disable your hyperdrive. Where will we find those controls?"

Before Kadrata could answer him, Obi Wan faced Qui Gon.

"Master, I have a plan. I think it would be more effective than what we had originally decided on, but it would mean leaving their hyperdrive intact," he told him.

Qui Gon raised his brow, intrigued. "Really? I'm anxious to hear it."

Obi Wan began to relay his idea of sending the pirate ship to Aurelia by altering the coordinates in the navigational computer and locking their hyperdrive on autopilot.

"We can contact the proper Aurelian authorities through the Trade Federation and have them standing by to intercept the ship when it comes out of lightspeed."

Qui Gon seemed impressed. "Very good thinking, Padawan. It would be a more effective way of dealing with our pirate friends. It would greatly reduce any chance of their escape."

Kadrata, on the other hand, was outraged. He jumped out of his chair and rushed over to the Jedi. He stopped short, finding Qui Gon's lightsaber once more pointed at his chest. He swallowed hard and took a step back.

"You're taking this ship to Aurelia over my dead body," the captain seethed. "We are all wanted men there. If they get their hands on us, we're finished."

"That's the idea," Obi Wan sneered back at him.

Qui Gon merely gazed back at Kadrata, unperturbed. He half shrugged. "We'll do what we must," he informed. He spared a glance at Obi Wan. "Get started. Don't worry about this one," he said, referring to the captain. "The sooner we can send these criminals on their way, the better."

Obi Wan nodded and started towards the nav computer, but the short-haired pirate named Sagev suddenly stepped in front of him.

"You can't do this," he told the Jedi.

Obi Wan crossed his arms over his chest. "Why not?" he asked, impatiently.

Sagev looked over at the captain nervously. "This ship has an encoded security system. If you even attempt to break into the nav computer without entering the proper codes, the ship will lock down the engines. Then, if the codes are still not entered in a given space of time, the computer will activate a self-destruct mechanism. We'll all be killed."

Obi Wan used the Force to sense if the pirate was being truthful. Apparently he was. Obi Wan glanced at his master questioningly. Qui Gon nodded again, understanding what it was his apprentice was asking.

"You will tell me the correct navigational codes now," Obi Wan began quietly, bringing the Force to bear with a wave of his hand.

"I do not know these codes," the pirate answered with a blank expression.

Obi Wan frowned. Again he sensed the pirate was telling him the truth. He sighed heavily and faced his master once more.

"Do what you can," Qui Gon said simply. He turned to Kadrata as Obi Wan seated himself at the navigational terminal. "The captain knows the codes we need," he stated, without a doubt. Obi Wan began looking up the coordinates he needed on the charts to change the ship's course, then began entering the information into the computer.

Kadrata smiled wickedly and shook his head. "Can't help you, sorry."

Qui Gon sighed. He raised his hand, then paused, sensing the Force rippling around him.

"Master, someone's coming," Obi Wan informed, looking up from the monitor he had been studying.

Qui Gon nodded, but focused back on Kadrata. "You will relay the codes now."

Kadrata's eyes became unseeing and he opened his mouth to speak, but was suddenly cut off by a burst of blaster fire.

Qui Gon whirled around to catch the blasts with his lightsaber. Obi Wan was on his feet a split second later, deflecting more blasts with his saber. The entrance to the bridge was completely cut off. Pirates had lined the hallway, firing indiscriminately at anything that moved. Because of their positions in the room, the Jedi could only deflect the blasts away from themselves and not back at their unseen attackers. Kadrata and Sagev simultaneously dove for cover, but not before Sagev was hit with a stray blast.

Judging from the amount of blaster fire and the number of rounds that were fired into the bridge, Qui Gon estimated at least six pirates. He and Obi Wan were doing all they could to stay on top of this assault, but some of the blasts were fired at the same time from two different directions and with two different targets. They tried to move forward to change the trajectory of the deflected blasts, but found themselves all but pinned down by the rain of blaster fire. To make matters worse, all the blasts that hit the magnetically sealed outer walls of the bridge ricocheted around the perimeter.

Qui Gon made a quick decision. He sent a mental command to Obi Wan. With an acknowledging look, the Jedi divided, sprinting for the cover of opposite walls. There they deactivated their lightsabers and waited; pressing as close to the wall as possible, occasionally ducking and dodging blasts that came too close, but making no move to deflect them.

After awhile, the shots being fired into the bridge lessened. After a little while longer, the blasts stopped altogether. Unable to see their intended victims but no longer hearing the hum of lightsabers, the pirates in the hall became convinced the Jedi must be dead. They entered cautiously at first, weaving their way slowly through the

smoke. Soon all six were combing the bridge, looking for the bodies of the slain Jedi.

Using the poor visibility to their advantage, Qui Gon and Obi Wan suddenly leapt forward, lightsabers ignited, and cut down the two nearest pirates. The others turned and began firing blindly, hitting a couple of their own men. The Jedi were now able to deflect the laser blasts back at the ones shooting them and quickly finished off the remainder of the pirates.

In minutes, the Jedi were the only ones left standing. As the smoke began to clear, they stood for a moment, catching their breath, stretching out with the Force to confirm what their eyes told them.

"No! Damn!" Qui Gon suddenly swore. He deactivated his lightsaber and hurried over to where Kadrata lay unmoving. The captain had obviously been shot. Qui Gon dropped to his knees and carefully rolled the pirate over. He placed his hand on Kadrata's temple, trying to sense any brain activity, then he sat back on his heels with a heavy sigh and glanced up at Obi Wan. "He's dead."

Obi Wan stood frozen momentarily, then turned off his saber, and strode over to the nav computer. He slipped into the chair at the terminal and began studying the readouts. Qui Gon came up behind him.

"How far did you get?" the Jedi Master asked quietly.

Obi Wan took the time to enter more data into the computer before answering. "Far enough," he began, chewing his lower lip thoughtfully. "This particular program is very similar to the one the Decipher uses. The codes aren't encrypted, only unknown. If I can find the program's set up file, the codes I need may be listed there." He looked up briefly. "I'm sure I can find the file. It's only a question of if I can find it in time."

Qui Gon folded his arms across his chest. "Is there such a security mechanism in the Decipher's program?"

Obi Wan shook his head. "Not that I was aware of. It required codes in order to change the coordinates in the computer, not to prevent the activation of a self destruct device." He sighed heavily. "It doesn't make any sense to me, but why would that pirate lie about such a thing? I felt real fear in him. I know he was telling the truth."

Qui Gon put his hand reassuringly on Obi Wan's shoulder. "Remember, just because someone believes something to be true doesn't necessarily make it so." He glanced over at the body of the short-haired pirate. "He may have only been telling you what he believed to be true. Someone might have told him this information. Since he did not know the codes, it would seem he actually had little to do with navigating."

Obi Wan twisted around to face Qui Gon. "In any case, it would be helpful if you could find me someone who does."

Qui Gon turned suddenly, his mind off and running.

"Stay alert, do what you can, I'll return as soon as possible," he told his apprentice.

Obi Wan looked up at his master sharply and quickly tamped down the surge of fear he felt and swallowed hard. He didn't like the idea of being left alone at this point in time, especially after their last attack. He wanted to protest, but sensed Qui Gon's reproach for even considering it. He bowed his head and nodded slowly, then turned his attention back to the monitor.

"Perhaps this wasn't such a good plan," he said quietly. "It would have been easier to just have the Verman authorities intercept them."

Qui Gon paused, sensing his padawan's unease with their present situation. He suddenly recalled what Tia had accused him of back at the restaurant. Maybe he did treat Obi Wan too much like an assistant. Perhaps this was one of those times his young apprentice needed a little bit more from him than words of wisdom. He took a deep breath.

"It would have been easier, " the Jedi Master explained calmly, "but not necessarily right. These men need to be brought before their own people. The same people they have pillaged and attacked. Try not to heed your uncertainties, Obi Wan. Your plan is a sound one. We've only suffered a few minor setbacks which can easily be remedied." He opened his mind to his padawan, hoping Obi Wan could sense in him everything he did not have the luxury of time to say.

"Yes, Master," Obi Wan formally responded, keeping his eyes on the readouts. He felt, rather than saw, Qui Gon leave the bridge. He had heard Qui Gon's words as another of life's lessons to be learned, but the Force around his master was charged with a rare outpouring of emotion. Obi Wan drew from his calm confidence and trust, wrapping it around himself, and absorbing it. His mind cleared and he became conscious of his rapidly beating heart and excessively sweaty palms. His body was still reacting in fear, but he didn't feel afraid anymore. He could feel a quiet peacefulness and.... A slow smile crept across Obi Wan's features. He sighed heavily and closed his eyes. "Thank you, Master. I love you too," he whispered.

Tia and Mandie had made it all the way to the generators without running into another soul.

Mandie kept watch as Tia set about manually overriding the stubborn generator. It didn't take long before the entire ship was plunged into darkness, signaling Tia that the override had worked. The generators had shut down the overhead lighting in favor of the defense shields. Now the shields were back up to full power.

"Can't we keep some of the lights on? I can't see a thing," Mandie complained.

"That may be a good thing," Tia countered, coming to stand beside her sister. "If we keep quiet, we just may make it back to the room without any trouble." She took ahold of Mandie's arm and began pulling her along the wall, feeling her way slowly towards the exit.

They suddenly heard unfamiliar voices coming their way. Tia yanked Mandie back behind the generator cabinets and crouched down.

Two pirates appeared and headed for the generators. They had taken it upon themselves to check out the reason behind the power outage. One of them began fumbling with the same generator Tia had just been working on.

"Here's the problem. Someone's shut down the power to this sub generator's distribution circuits," he pointed out to the other pirate.

Tia swore to herself as the pirate rerouted the generator's power back to the overhead lights. She and Mandie shrank back further as the lights suddenly blazed back on. They waited until the two pirates had left the generator room, then scurried out of their hiding place.

Tia hurried over to the malfunctioning generator and quickly redirected the power back to the defense shields. Once more, the ship became shrouded in darkness. Mandie started for the exit, but Tia suddenly pulled her back behind the cabinets, on a hunch.

Her instincts proved to be true. The two pirates came back, mumbling and cursing in confusion.

"I did too fix it! You saw the lights come on!" the one pirate argued with the other.

"Well, fix it so they stay on this time!" his companion snapped. "We're going to need light in order to load the cargo."

Load? Tia thought wildly. They were ready to load? Wasn't anybody going to stop them? A knot suddenly formed in her throat and she closed her eyes tightly to relieve the pressure she was beginning to feel from an oncoming headache. Where were the security guards? The crewmen? Where were the Jedi? She quickly faced Mandie.

"We've got to stop them!" she whispered insistently.

"Ssssh!" Mandie scolded. The lights came back on and the two pirates left the generators once more. Mandie stood up. "Qui Gon said they weren't going to resist them, remember? He had something else planned."

Tia's eyes flashed as she climbed out from behind the cabinets. "Well, whatever the hell he had planned obviously didn't work if they are loading the crystals! Look Mandie, who knows what happened up there while we were sitting around in our room. We could be the only ones left to stop them!"

Mandie looked mortified. "What are you saying?"

Tia frowned. "Don't think the worst. Things just may not have turned out the way Qui Gon had planned. Maybe they just weren't able to accomplish what they had set out to do originally."

Mandie shook her head. "I don't know, Tia. We've got one gun between us and absolutely no combat experience. How do you propose to stop

the pirates from taking the crystals?"

"One thing at a time, okay?" Tia said, her mind racing. "First we need to make sure this generator keeps the power on the shields. Then, I get myself a blaster of my own." She knelt before the power distribution circuits and once more turned off the ship's lights. She stood up and shooed Mandie back behind the generator cabinets. Mandie began protesting, but stopped, hearing approaching footsteps. Tia took the blaster away from her and flipped off the safety and set it for stun. Mandie's eyes grew wide as she realized just what her sister was about to do.

The pirate who had been altering the generator's power came storming back into the generator room. He kicked the machine furiously, then knelt down and began to redirect the power in the circuits.

"Freeze!" Tia ordered, jumping out from behind the cabinets. She pointed the blaster at the kneeling pirate. Slowly, the pirate raised his hands and turned to face her. He smiled when he saw her and seemed to visibly relax.

"Well, what have we here? You must be one of the lovely Orman sisters," he drawled. His left hand lowered and went for his blaster.

"I wouldn't if I were you!" Tia warned. "Stand up and keep your hands where I can see them!"

The pirate obeyed, but still seemed unfazed by Tia's threats. "Let's not get hasty there, pretty lady. You don't want to go around shooting people now do you? Why don't you just put the blaster down and we can talk this over."

Tia sighed. "Give it a rest, okay." She locked her eyes on him and pointed the blaster at his chest. "Mandie, get his weapon!"

Mandie suddenly came out from behind the cabinets shaking her head. "You're crazy, you know that?" she told her sister. She stepped over to the pirate, straining to see in the dark. She reached for his blaster, but he grabbed her suddenly and held her against his side with his arm around her throat. He jammed the end of the gun into her ribs. Mandie yelped and Tia swore.

"Now," the pirate began impatiently. "Put your blaster down or the little bitch gets fried."

Tia shook her head slowly. "You jerk. Now you've gone and pissed me off." Without hesitation she lowered her blaster, aimed at his crotch, and fired.

The pirate opened his mouth to scream but passed out in a heap before anything came out. Mandie pried his blaster away from him and kicked him for good measure.

"Creep!" she spat and stalked over to Tia. "All right, you've had your fun now, let's get back to the room."

Tia turned and began walking towards the exit with new purpose. "Oh no. I'm not going to just sit around and let these male chauvinists

take over my ship." She turned to her sister with a smile. "Besides, Qui Gon is an intelligent man. He couldn't have possibly believed that we would stay in that room once things started heating up out here. If he did, he's not as smart as I thought." She smiled devilishly and tightened her grip on her blaster.

Qui Gon sighed deeply, looking around the empty room. He never really believed Tia and Mandie would just wait there. He knew Tia better than that. Unfortunately, that awareness did little to soothe his rising irritation. He needed her now, but he had no idea where to find her.

He closed his eyes briefly, pulling the Force to him and letting it fill him. He started off down the hall, allowing the Force to guide him to where he needed to go. Knowing his time was limited, he opted for speed rather than caution, trusting the Force to warn him of any impending danger. He found himself descending to one of the lower levels of the ship.

The Force around him darkened suddenly. Qui Gon stopped in his tracks and flattened himself against the wall. He approached the next turn warily. As he drew nearer, he could hear voices. One of the voices was familiar to him. He peered around the corner and frowned at what he saw.

There were three armed pirates holding most of the Decipher's security force captive, along with the droid, HJK-260. One of the pirates stood guard beside the huddled crew members, while the other two, oddly enough, questioned the droid.

"Where are the women?" a pirate with a scar across his left eye demanded.

The droid turned slowly to face him.

"I told you before. You must not have listened. Miss Orman and her sister are on the upper main deck," HJ replied.

"You're lying! We just checked up there."

"Sir, droids such as myself are incapable of deception. It's against our programming," the droid replied, sounding a little insulted.

He is lying, Qui Gon thought. That, or he truly was the most incompetent and unreliable droid in the galaxy.

"Oh just blast the damn thing!" the other pirate grumbled. "It's useless. It doesn't know anything."

The scarred pirate hesitated. "I'll give you another chance," he told HJ. "What about the Jedi Knights? Where are they at?"

HJ gave a mechanical sigh. "I am entirely unaware of the whereabouts of the Jedi."

The scarred pirate cursed and spat on the floor. "Yeah, you're right. It's worthless." He raised his blaster and pointed it at HJ.

Qui Gon quickly debated whether saving the droid was worth exposing himself and inevitably coming under fire as a result. Tia was rather fond of that droid. She would more than likely be mad at him if he had a chance to save HJ and he didn't. Besides, Qui Gon reasoned, HJ might actually know where Tia and Mandie had gone. Reaching a decision, Qui Gon sighed in resignation and pulled his lightsaber from his belt, igniting it.

The pirates all turned simultaneously, hearing the loud raspy hiss behind them. HJ seized his chance and hurried off just as Qui Gon stepped forward.

"You're not getting anywhere near those women, so forget about them and concentrate on the Jedi," Qui Gon told them icily.

Initially, the three pirates merely stood gaping at him, too stunned to move. The captive crew members began whispering among themselves.

Qui Gon waved his lightsaber tauntingly in front of the nonplussed pirates. "Come on, gentlemen, I don't have all day," the Jedi said impatiently. "Either fire at me or let me be on my way." Qui Gon faced the crew members. "Now would probably be a good time to leave this place." Collectively, the crew faced the pirates to gauge their reaction. "Go," Qui Gon urged. "I'll deal with them." Encouraged, the crew members quickly filed out of the room, leaving the Jedi alone with the pirates.

The pirates glanced back and forth at each other. Then, as if responded to some silent command, they fanned out, raising their blasters.

Qui Gon adopted a classic defensive posture, concentrating on the Force and gathering it to him until he could feel it flowing inside him. He knew if the pirates fired at the same time from different angles, he wouldn't be able to deflect the blasts back at them, he would only be able to deflect the blasts away. It would be tricky, but it could be done.

The pirates suddenly fired, just as Qui Gon predicted. They seemed to know this strategy was the only way to increase their odds of actually shooting down an armed Jedi and keep the Jedi from being able to send the blasts back at them. More than likely they had gone up against Jedi before. Now they seemed anxious to rid themselves of his presence, and no doubt gain considerable approval from their superiors by doing so.

Qui Gon swung his lightsaber smoothly from right to left, catching each of the blasts and propelling them into the far wall. The pirates fired again repeatedly and this time the Jedi brought the saber back around from left to right and back again. It reminded Qui Gon of the last assault he and Obi Wan suffered on the bridge of the pirate's ship. Unless something changed, it was a no win situation. He knew eventually, one of the pirates would misfire, but he didn't want to wait any longer. He had wasted too much time already on them. As the pirates continued shooting, Qui Gon began to focus on the one to his left, bearing the Force's influence down on him. The very next time the pirates shot at him, the one on the left fired a second too late. It was all Qui Gon needed. He caught the first two blasts, then spun his lightsaber around in his hand and caught the delayed blast,

sending it back at the slower pirate in a precise hit.

The remaining two pirates froze, startled. They glanced at their stricken companion, then eyed the Jedi warily.

"What's it going to be?" Qui Gon asked quietly.

To his surprise, the two pirates slowly lowered their blasters to the floor in front of them and raised their hands.

"All right, we give up," the scarred pirate declared formally. "Look, we were only doing our duty. Only following orders."

Qui Gon sighed and lowered his lightsaber. "Go on. Get out of here." He watched the pirates slowly back out of the room, hands still raised, then turn and run down the hall. The Jedi deactivated his saber and returned it to his belt. He started off in the direction HJ had gone.

HJ hurried along, wishing he were back on the bridge, away from all those strange, hostile humans the ship suddenly seemed to be infested with. He suddenly heard someone calling his name and turned around and saw the Jedi sprinting towards him.

"Oh Jedi Jinn. What a relief it was for me that you came along when you did," HJ began gratefully. "I truly had no idea you were so close by."

"Don't worry about that now," Qui Gon told him. "I don't have much time. I need to find Tia. You know where she is, don't you?"

The droid nodded without hesitation. "I wasn't supposed to tell anyone. I was supposed to just say she and Miss Mandie were on the upper main deck. Truthfully, they are nowhere near there. They went to the generator room." He paused and gestured around him. "The lights keep going off because one of the generators malfunctioned. It's pulling the power off the defense shields. They were going to try to manually override it."

Qui Gon patted the droid's shoulder appreciatively.

"Thank you, HJ, you have been very helpful," he said and hurried passed the droid, then he stopped and looked back at him over his shoulder. "Do you know anything about navigational computer setup programs? Would you know how to access one?"

"I should hope so, Sir. I am an earlier model 260, but Miss Orman and Captain Fostey make sure I'm upgraded regularly."

Qui Gon nodded. "I need you to come with me, HJ." He turned, grabbing the droid's arm and pulled him down the hall to an elevator. "Go to the upper deck, to the starboard entryway. Wait for me there, understand?" The elevator opened and Qui Gon pushed the droid inside. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

HJ nodded. "Anything to help, Jedi Jinn. You did save me back there and I truly am thankful for your assistance."

Qui Gon smiled. "You're welcome." The elevator door closed and Qui Gon turned sharply and dashed back up the hall.

Generators, he thought. At least she had a halfway legitimate excuse for venturing out of her room. At least she wasn't deliberately disobeying him and risking her life needlessly as he had first suspected.

He came to a stairwell and descended it rapidly, taking three steps at a time. He remembered seeing the generators on this level when he had first explored the ship. He thought he should have been able to sense Tia by now. He wasn't able to yet and something told him he wasn't going to either.

The room housing the generators was as empty as the last room he had expected to find her in. Empty, except for a lone pirate sprawled out on the floor. Qui Gon could sense the life force still in him and knew he wasn't dead, just knocked out. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He could see glimpses of what had unfolded here and knew Tia and Mandie had at least been here. Unfortunately, he still had no clue as to where they went once they left this area. Qui Gon cleared his mind and refocused the Force on Tia's presence. The ripples of energy he felt told him she was close.

He left the generator room, once more letting the Force guide him. Now he found himself heading for the cargo hold. The closer he got to it, the clearer his sense of Tia became. She was currently a mass of dizzying emotions too complex in structure for Qui Gon to sort out. One thing was clear to the Jedi however. Wherever she was and whatever she was doing, he wasn't going to like it.

The Force pulsed around him and his ears soon confirmed what his senses had told him earlier. He could hear a relay of shots being fired, coming from opposite sides of the cargo hold.

He crouched low and circled around the perimeter, moving swiftly from one position of cover to another. The numerous stacked crates provided him with an easy route to where Tia and Mandie were.

At first, Qui Gon thought they had been discovered in the hold and were being pinned down by blaster fire. After closer inspection, it was evident that they were the ones doing most of the shooting. They had a small contingent of pirates trapped close to the loading ramp. The pirates had been in the process of removing the cargo when the two sisters came upon them and opened fire. The pirates fired back occasionally, knowing the futility of such an action, but hoped to at least keep their attackers from coming any closer.

Tia and Mandie responded to them with excessive enthusiasm, raining a torrent of blaster fire on the hapless pirates, even though they couldn't actually see anyone to accurately target either. They were so entirely focused on the task at hand, they did not hear Qui Gon come up behind them.

The Jedi quickly covered Tia's mouth with his hand and pulled her back towards him as he wrenched her blaster away from her. Startled, Mandie whirled around, ready to blow his head off, but caught herself just before actually firing. She sighed heavily with relief and lowered her blaster.

"Damn, Qui Gon, you scared the life out of me," Mandie scolded.

The Jedi glared at her, still holding Tia captive against him. She squirmed and struggled, but he only tightened his grip more. He was certain she had instigated all this and he wasn't ready to talk to her just yet.

"We have to get out of here," he growled.

Mandie gestured absently behind her. "But they're taking our cargo!" she protested, turning and firing off a few more shots.

Qui Gon took a deep cleansing breath and fought to maintain control of his temper. "You are not stopping them, only delaying them and that is defeating our intent. Beside that, you're risking your lives doing so."

Tia began stamping her foot impatiently and Qui Gon felt her teeth graze his palm. Before she could actually bite him, he released her and stepped back.

Tia spun around to face him with a furious expression, ready to rip him to shreds, but as soon as her eyes met his, her anger dissolved away. The sight of him standing there all but melted her heart. She flung her arms around his neck and kissed him zealously.

Qui Gon's own anger just as quickly dissipated as soon as Tia's lips touched his. He allowed himself a single moment of blissful indulgence before prying her away from him.

"Later, My Love, I promise," he whispered to her.

Tia sighed heavily, her eyes drinking in the sight of him. "Thank goodness, you're all right!" she exclaimed. "When I heard they were loading our cargo, I began to fear the worst." Her eyes narrowed somewhat. "Why are we just letting them load our cargo? Where is my security? What have you been doing all this time? Where have you been?"

The pirates across the hold fired several more shots at them. Mandie fired a couple of rounds back.

Qui Gon put his hands on his hips. "Let them have the cargo. The cargo is inconsequential at the moment," he began, then shook his head. "I don't have time to explain everything now. I need you to come with me." He held out Tia's blaster to her.

Tia took it and fired at the pirates again. "If you think you're taking us back to our room, we're not going," she told him defiantly, speaking for Mandie as well.

Qui Gon closed his eyes briefly to summon more patience through the Force. "I'm not taking you to your room. I'm taking you to the bridge of the pirates' ship." He suddenly had Tia and Mandie's undivided attention. They both lowered their blasters and looked up at him inquiringly. "Obi Wan is there now. He needs your help," the Jedi Master continued.

Tia and Mandie exchanged wary glances. Qui Gon began ushering them forward.

"We have to hurry," he urged. "I promise, I'll explain everything on the way."

Obi Wan had four different computer terminals searching files for the program setup he needed. He stalked around the bridge, trying to remain calm, trying to be patient, and trying to stay optimistic.

He was careful not to stray too far from the nav computer console, keeping a wary eye on the monitor for any sign of change. So far, the computer had accepted the data he had entered without triggering the security device.

He passed the time by wreaking havoc on as many of the pirates' manual controls as possible: draining all the power from their weapons terminal, destroying the remaining intership communications, and shutting down all the ship's viewscreens.

While flitting from one point of destruction to another, he tried recalling every detail of reprograming the Decipher's course coordinates. On the Decipher, he had been able to enter all the course changing information the computer needed, but wasn't able to actually execute the course change until after the security codes had been entered. Captain Fostey had said the ship would not be able to leave Istse without the new coordinates already in the system. Perhaps, he had been referring to an engine lockdown.

Encouraged, Obi Wan slid into the chair at the nav computer terminal and hurriedly continued entering the new coordinates into the computer. When he had finished, he sat forward, his eyes locked on the monitor, and held his breath.

A prompt came up on the monitor. It was the same prompt as the one he'd received when he reprogrammed the Decipher's computer.

"Warning, enter code keys before continuing," he read out loud. He sighed heavily and leaned back in his chair. At least now he knew the ship wouldn't blow up all of a sudden. Now, all he needed to do before continuing with the course change was find and enter the correct codes.

He got up and checked the monitors of the computers he had searching the files for him. Two of the computers had given up, declaring the file unfound. The other two were still searching. Obi Wan frowned, wondering if he would even be able to open the file if he did find it. He folded his arms across his chest, leaning his hips against the back of a chair, and closed his eyes.

Patience, patience, patience, he chanted to himself, gathering the Force to him. He couldn't do anything now but wait. He glanced down at the bodies strewn about the bridge and shook his head. The sight left him feeling numb and cold. Qui Gon was right. All this for jewels. Nothing really necessary. Just jewels.

He reached down and opened the pouch on his utility belt where he had stored the crystal Mandie had given him. He pulled it out and held it

up to his eyes.

Obi Wan still found the stone's beauty ethereal. Looking at it, he could almost understand why it was considered so valuable. Just gazing at it was exhilarating. Holding it in his hand made him feel privileged. He smiled slightly, wondering whether it was the stone itself that provoked such positive feelings or the fact that it was a gift from Mandie. He decided on the latter. She could have given him a piece of pit gravel and he would still be just as thrilled by it.

The Force stirred inside him suddenly, darkening with warning. Obi Wan's eyes widened with realization and his heart began pounding. He returned the crystal to his belt and pulled the hilt of his lightsaber free.

Pirates. Six, no eight of them, Obi Wan told himself. He took a deep steadying breath and pulled the Force in around him. Now was not the time to panic, he chided himself. He quickly looked around. There really was no place to hide; no real cover of any kind.

Maybe he could fend off their attack for a little while. He might even be able to take down a few of them along the way, but the reality of his situation told him it would only be a matter of time before he slipped up. And he knew any mistake he would make would most likely result in his death.

He licked his lips, trying to moisten his suddenly dry mouth and reluctantly clipped his lightsaber back on his belt. Maybe they would leave it alone. Maybe they would assume he was unarmed, like they had with Qui Gon.

"Maybe," he muttered, bracing himself. There were too many maybes to rely on to suit his taste.

Pirates suddenly swarmed onto the bridge, blasters raised, ready to fire at anything that moved. Three of them immediately spied Obi Wan and rushed over to him, two of them seizing his arms and wrenching them behind his back, the third just stood in front of him, smiling wickedly. Three other pirates darted around, checking the bodies, while the remaining two began assessing the damaged equipment.

Obi Wan swore inwardly as the pirate in front of him snatched his lightsaber from his belt without hesitation. Now he was truly unarmed. Unexpectedly, the same pirate suddenly and maliciously backhanded him.

"You've been a busy little Jedi, haven't you?" the pirate sneered.

Obi Wan flexed his jaw a few times to be sure it hadn't been dislocated. He glared up at the pirate.

"What if I have?" he shot back. "What are you going to do about it?"

The pirate raised his hand to strike him again, but lost the inclination when the young Jedi refused to flinch. "Cheeky, aren't you? I wouldn't be so quick to smart off if I were you!" He reached over and lifted Obi Wan's braid from his shoulder, running his

fingers down the length of it. "Why you're nothing but a trainee. I'll tell you what, you cooperate, and I'll go easy on you."

Obi Wan leaned back, pulling against the two pirates who held his arms. They only twisted his arms harder, pushing him forward. Obi Wan tried to close his mind off to the pain. He continued to draw from the Force, focusing on its quiet power, allowing him to remain calm enough to keep his fear and his temper in check.

This strategy is not going well, Obi Wan thought. It was hard not to resist them and not to fight back. Especially if they insisted on baiting him.

The monitor on one of the computers Obi Wan had been working with caught the attention of one of the pirates. He called out to the pirate who had Obi Wan's lightsaber.

"Druck, take a look at this!"

The pirate momentarily abandoned his captive and strode over to the console. Obi Wan dropped his eyes and feigned disinterest, all the while screaming inside, pleading with them not to touch anything.

The pirate named Druck studied the screen briefly, then turned and faced Obi Wan again. He smiled humorlessly. "You've just been up to all kinds of mischief, haven't you? My friend was right about you Jedi. Nothing but trouble." He slowly walked back over to Obi Wan.

"What friend?" Obi Wan asked, furrowing his brow.

Druck nodded. "Yes, he was always complaining about the Jedi on his ship. I'm sure you must have met him. Does the name Corbin Roos ring a bell with you?"

Obi Wan resumed his apathetic expression. He lowered his eyes again and said nothing.

Druck caught Obi Wan's chin roughly in his hand and wrenched his head back. "You wouldn't know what happened to my pal, Corbin, would you? It would seem he all but disappeared." The pirate leaned closer to him. "As a matter of fact, none of us have had much luck finding anyone we wanted to find. Specifically, two very rich and lovely ladies. I know you must have stashed them somewhere safe, haven't you?" He released Obi Wan and stepped back slightly, waiting. The young Jedi ignored him. Druck sighed and held up the hilt of Obi Wan's lightsaber, studying it. His hand moved over the control knobs and the lightsaber suddenly ignited. The pirate grinned, waving the blade through the air, making it hum.

Obi Wan's stomach knotted. This is not happening, he thought. He's going to kill me with my own lightsaber if I don't find a way out of this mess. The Jedi watched with growing anxiety as the pirate deftly bisected a nearby chair. Master, anytime now, Obi Wan pleaded mentally. Druck was fascinated by the saber's power. He tapped it on a railing, delighting in the flash and hiss of the blade as it severed the post.

"Oh, wait," he suddenly announced. "This is a little too strong for

our purposes." He fiddled with the controls on the hilt, adjusting the intensity of the lightsaber to a lower setting; then dragged the blade slowly across the body of one of the dead pirates. It blistered the skin and left a red, raw-looking mark. "Ah, perfect." He stepped back over to Obi Wan. "Start talking, Boy."

Obi Wan glared menacingly at back at him.

Druck grew impatient. He held the tip of the lightsaber's blade in front of Obi Wan's eyes. "Such pleasing, youthful features. It would be a real shame to scar such a handsome face, but I will if I have to. All you have to do is tell me where the women are."

Obi Wan frowned at the pirate. "Look, you have the cargo of jewels. Why do you have to have the women too? They'll be more trouble to you than they could possibly be worth," he suggested hopefully.

Druck shrugged. "It does get lonely in space. You understand, I'm sure. Besides, they are worth a lot of money. So how about it? You tell me where they are, and I won't disfigure you." He waved the saber slowly back and forth.

Obi Wan locked his eyes on the pirate's. "Any scar you inflict on me is one I'll wear with honor," the young Jedi replied. "It will always serve to remind me of how even the most vile criminals can be defeated through the power of the Force."

Druck laughed. "Suit yourself." He lowered the tip of the lightsaber towards Obi Wan's face.

Enough of this passive resistance, Obi Wan thought and closed his eyes. It was time for action. He waited until he could feel the heat of the blade on his cheek, then wholly surrendered himself to the Force.

Bracing himself against the two pirates who held him, Obi Wan jumped up and planted his feet squarely on Druck's chest, sending him reeling across the bridge, and colliding with a computer console. He slumped soundlessly to the floor, dropping the lightsaber. Obi Wan backflipped to twist his arms free from the pirates who held him. He sprung straight up, kicking out with both legs at the same time, effectively knocking his former captors out. He spun around and reached towards his lightsaber, calling it to his hand, and readjusted the blade's strength to full power.

By now the other pirates on the bridge had begun shooting. Obi Wan had to move twice as fast in order to deflect the torrent of laser blasts fired at him, but still managed to catch each one. Two of the pirates fell from the blaster fire right away. Obi Wan Force-pushed two others to throw their aim off and buy him enough time to make it to the other side of the bridge. He could feel the strength of the Force brimming within him. He wasn't even consciously aware of when and how he moved most of the time. The blasts he could not deflect, he ducked or leapt over, swinging the lightsaber completely around with graceful precision in a perfectly timed and coordinated dance.

He was so focused, he didn't notice that three more beings had joined in the fray. Between the four of them, they quickly finished off the rest of the attacking pirates and in minutes, everything on the

bridge was eerily silent.

Obi Wan stood breathing hard, struggling to calm his racing heart, and cleared his mind. It was then he sensed he was not alone. He easily recognized each life force present and sighed heavily, relieved. As the smoke began to clear, he deactivated his lightsaber and looked around. He was more than a little grateful to see Qui Gon, and surprised to see Tia and Mandie, both armed to the teeth, standing on the other side of the bridge. He smiled broadly.

They all rushed over to him at once: Qui Gon making a thorough assessment of possible injuries his apprentice might have sustained, Tia fawning over him in a concerned, motherly sort of way, and Mandie all but smothering him with kisses. He wriggled free of them all and backed up a few steps.

"I'm fine," he assured. "Just give me a minute."

Tia suddenly glared at Qui Gon. "When you said he needed our help, you weren't kidding."

Qui Gon sighed. He faced Obi Wan. "I was unaware of your dilemma until just a few minutes ago," he said with a hint of apology.

Obi Wan gestured around him. "They only came up on me a few minutes ago. I doubted my chances of surviving a confrontation with them and surrendered to them initially." He glanced at the unconscious Druck. "Then they started getting nasty."

Qui Gon raised his brow. He looked around and smiled slowly. "Apparently, Padawan, your self-doubt was unwarranted." He wore that rare 'shouldn't-be-surprised, impressed-as-hell, teeming-with-pride' expression that Obi Wan lived for.

"Thank you, Master," the young Jedi acknowledged with a slight bow of his head. Mandie came up to him and put her arm around his waist.

"I'm just glad you're all right," she said, smiling up at him. Obi Wan leaned over and kissed her forehead.

Tia turned towards the hallway and waved to an unseen occupant. "It's safe now HJ. You can come in."

The droid peered into the bridge first as if to see for himself, then ambled towards them.

"I'm only too happy to assist you, but I would feel better if you could assure me we won't have any more melees such as this," he complained.

"Hopefully not," Qui Gon said. He gestured at a piece of debris on the floor and sent it hurling into the control panel at the side of the entryway, closing the blast doors. "That might help for the time being, but we have to hurry." He faced Obi Wan. "Were you able to find the codes?"

Obi Wan shook his head. He strode over to the nav computer and studied the monitors. Nothing had changed but now there was only one computer still searching for the file. Tia walked over and seated

herself at the terminal. Obi Wan leaned over her.

"It seems like the same program," Tia told him. "Without the codes, you won't be able to activate the hyperdrive without the nav computer locking down the engines. It's for security. All Aurelian F-Class ships are equipped with it because of the cargo they carry. Namely jewels. It's supposed to deter hijacking."

"Are the codes standard by any chance?" Obi Wan asked, hopefully. "Do you know them?"

Tia grimaced. "Yes, but there are several. The right ones should be listed somewhere. Did you check the setup files?"

Obi Wan nodded and sighed. "There's one computer still looking for it. That one there," he told her and pointed to a terminal on his left.

"Then that may be our animal," Tia said and leaned back in her chair. She turned to HJ. "We need access to that file, HJ. Make sure the computer finds it and opens it for us."

The droid nodded and immediately went to work. "You can rely on me, Miss Tia."

Tia had to smile. "I know I can, HJ."

"What about the ship's self-destruct mechanism? At what point would the computer activate that?" Qui Gon asked.

Tia frowned. "Probably after the lockdown. I've never heard of installing such a device, but we are talking about pirates here. I don't intend to go that far without first entering the codes."

Mandie came up and stood beside Obi Wan. "Maybe the best thing to do would be to escape out of the program," she offered.

Tia looked over at Qui Gon. "She may be right. If the file doesn't have the codes listed, there will be no other alternative."

"But you said you knew the codes," Qui Gon countered. He slowly walked over to her, folding his arms across his chest into his sleeves. He projected an aura of casual serenity that defied their current situation.

"I do, but there are different codes. If we enter the wrong code keys, the course coordinates could be rejected, and the computer could then activate the security mechanism. It's too risky."

"Miss Tia," HJ called out. "I have accessed the setup file, but regret to inform you that the code keys are not listed in it."

Tia closed her eyes briefly and swore softly. "All right then," she announced. "I'm backing us out of this program so we can get the hell out of here." She froze, suddenly feeling Qui Gon's hand on her shoulder.

"No," he said calmly. "Enter the codes."

She angrily twisted around to face him, but found herself quieted by his steady gaze. His dark blue eyes reflected a knowing confidence which he seemed to be pouring over her. Tia took a deep breath and swallowed hard. She slowly turned back to the nav computer.

"I can't even begin to think which would be the right one," she said shakily.

"Then don't think," Qui Gon said, leaning over and whispering in her ear. "Feel."

"Feel?" Tia asked weakly.

"Yes. Don't rationalize. Close your eyes and clear your mind. Think of nothing. Just be aware of how you feel and then do," the Jedi Master instructed quietly.

"Feel. Sure." Tia paused for a moment, then began punching in a series of codes.

Mandie held her breath. Obi Wan took her hand and squeezed it tightly. Qui Gon straightened, resuming his nonchalant pose behind Tia.

The computer beeped suddenly, then began processing the previously entered data. Tia exhaled forcibly, then started to laugh.

"It worked! It worked!" she shrieked. "It's changing the ship's course! We did it! We did it!" She sprang up out of her chair and threw her arms around Qui Gon ecstatically.

Obi Wan hugged Mandie, picking her up and swinging her around.

"Ah...Miss Tia?" HJ began. The tone of his voice brought an abrupt end to their celebrating.

"What is it?"

The droid gestured at a blinking white light on one of the control panels.

"This sensor is signaling that the cargo hold has been sealed," HJ informed. "It would appear the pirates have completed transferring the cargo."

"Come on," Qui Gon urged. "We have to get out of here now. They'll be taking off soon."

Tia frowned. "Now, you promised if I let them have my cargo to get them out of here, that I'd get it back once we got to Aurelia, right?"

Qui Gon nodded. "As soon as we get back to the Decipher, you can contact the Trade Federation and the proper Aurelian authorities and have them standing by to intercept the ship once it comes out of lightspeed. Your cargo will still reach Aurelia, safe and sound, as if we transported it ourselves."

"And you're positive this vessel is now going to Aurelia?" Mandie

inquired.

Obi Wan smiled and nodded. "Everything is set now. They won't confirm the coordinates. They won't feel a need to. They'll want to make a fast getaway and probably go right into hyperspace. Then they won't be able to change the coordinates even if they did discover our sabotage."

Qui Gon took Tia's hand and began leading her to the blast doors. "We still have to get back to the Decipher without being detected," he reminded. He stopped in front of the control panel on the wall and opened the blast doors. Tia squeezed his hand. He looked back at her. "Don't worry," he added encouragingly. "We've made it this far. We can make it even further. Everything will be all right."

Tia smiled up at him. She had to wonder if he was actually referring to getting back to the ship, or something more personal. "I know," she replied. "It feels right." She turned to Mandie and Obi Wan. "Come on you two!"

Mandie in turn faced HJ. "Let's go HJ! No more melees after this, we promise."

Qui Gon stood beside Tia just outside the door to his quarters, listening to Captain Fostey relay the events of the past hour. After releasing the Decipher and pulling away, the pirate ship had tried to torpedo them just as he had predicted, but seemed unable to. After several tries, the pirates gave up and went into lightspeed.

Tia nodded. "We need to contact the Trade Federation and the Aurelian authorities. That ship is going to Aurelia. It must be stopped."

"Right away, Miss Orman," Captain Fostey said. He turned to go, then paused and frowned. "Our hyperdrive was damaged. We'll get home, but it will be slow going."

"I'll have Obi Wan take a look at it," Qui Gon offered. "Maybe he can help repair it."

Captain Fostey nodded and hurried off. Tia turned to Qui Gon and slipped her arms around his waist.

"I'm in no hurry," she said and grinned. "Gee, Too bad the hyperdrive got hit. It will make for a much longer trip than first expected."

Qui Gon tilted her face up to his, burying his fingers in her hair. "What shall we do to pass all that time?"

Tia leaned closer to him. "I don't know. There's no cargo to guard anymore. My kidnapper has been arrested by our security guards. The pirates left." She brushed her lips against his. "Can you think of anything we could possibly do?"

"Uh-huh," Qui Gon responded, folding his arms around her. He kissed her hungrily and leaned into her. "I can think of something I'd like to do with you right now," he whispered.

Tia felt her knees weaken and her heart begin to pound, but she also felt a little apprehensive and pulled away from him. "After all you've been through today? Really, Lover, I would understand if you just wanted to go to bed...and sleep."

Qui Gon shook his head. He opened the door and pulled Tia inside, then caught her up in his arms. Tia laughed, delighted, and hugged his neck to steady herself.

"After all I've been through today, you would deny this?" the Jedi Master asked, carrying her to his bed. "The anticipation of which has helped me endure all the day's tribulations?"

"Oh well, if you put it that way," Tia replied.

He set her down carefully and stretched out beside her. Smiling and gazing lovingly into her eyes, he gently stroked her hair. His demeanor shifted suddenly and he became very serious.

"I want to try something," he began quietly. "I want you to trust me and do exactly what I say."

Tia was intrigued. She nodded slowly. "I trust you."

"Do you love me?"

"I love you."

"And I love you." He kissed her softly. "Tonight, I want to share with you everything I feel and everything I'm thinking." He took a deep breath and locked his eyes on hers. "I am so aware of you when we are together," he explained. "I want to give you that same awareness of me."

Tia reached up and touched his hair. "I don't understand," she admitted.

Qui Gon smiled. "This sense I have of you, is unlike anything I've ever felt with someone before. It's very intimate. It's very profound. If you could feel it too, our minds and spirits could be united beyond our physical selves. Our love will be able to transcend boundaries. Even if we cannot be together, we will never truly be apart."

"But how can I sense you? I can't use the Force like you can. I wouldn't know how."

"I'll show you. I'll help you," Qui Gon reassured her. He began to undress her. "Just put aside all your inhibitions and preconceived notions." He slid her blouse from her shoulder and trailed his fingers over her exposed skin. He started to kiss and nibble his way up her neck.

Tia's whole body began to tingle. "All right," she sighed. "What do I have to do first?"

Qui Gon traced the curve of her ear with his tongue and then kissed it. "Make love to me," he breathed.

Obi Wan had been in the engine room assessing the damage to the hyperdrive with the ship's engineer. He knew he would most likely be asked to help repair it and wanted to know right away the extent of the damage. He and the engineer agreed that they probably wouldn't be able to fix it until they reached Aurelia.

Wearily he made his way to the upper decks, anxious to just crawl into bed and sleep for a lightyear. But as he approached the door to the room he shared with Qui Gon, he could sense the Jedi Master's presence along with another familiar presence and quickly concluded his own presence in the room would not exactly be welcome at this time.

He refocused on Mandie, wondering if she might still be up and about and possibly receptive to company at this late hour. When he came to the door of her room, he paused listening, and stretched out with the Force to see if she might be sleeping. She was apparently awake. He knocked softly and waited.

Mandie opened the door to a darkened room and smiled when she saw who her late night visitor was. "Hi," she greeted.

"Hi. I hope I haven't disturbed you. I knew you weren't sleeping," Obi Wan explained.

"No, I was just lying in bed, thinking," Mandie responded.

"Oh." He stood staring at her, unable to move suddenly. His eyes roved down the length of her, then slowly back up again. "Wow. You look nice in that," he sighed, referring to the white diaphanous night gown she was wearing. It reminded him of the dress she was wearing when they first met.

"Thanks," she said, genuinely pleased. "Come in." She stepped aside to admit him, then closed the door.

Obi Wan furrowed his brow and began chewing his lower lip fitfully. "Um, I could use a place to sleep tonight. Perhaps Tia's room?"

Mandie narrowed her eyes. "I don't know," she hesitated. "I'm not sure if she'll be coming back tonight or not."

Obi Wan shook his head knowingly. "I wouldn't think so. In fact, I'm fairly sure of it," he told her. He stood rooted to the floor as she glided over to her bed and threw back the covers. She looked up at him expectantly.

"But there's always a chance she might," Mandie countered.

Obi Wan felt his heart skitter inside his chest. He took a small step back.

"All right then," he half whispered. "I'll just sleep over there again." His eyes darted to the corner he had slept in the last time he spent the night in her room.

Mandie frowned deeply. "Nonsense! Come on, there's plenty of room."

She walked over to him and took his hand. She pulled him to the bed and pushed him down until he was sitting on the edge. "I won't bite you," she said with a coy smile. "Unless you want me to, that is."

Obi Wan felt himself blush. He watched her as she bent down to grasp his ankle then leaned back, pulling off his boot. She tossed it aside and pulled off the other boot.

"Now, just lie down and relax," she commanded, placing her hand on his chest, pushing him back.

Obi Wan settled back against the pillows and grappled for the blankets. Mandie crawled over the foot of the bed to get to her side. She wriggled up against him under the covers. Then she tucked herself under his arm by picking it up and wrapping it around herself. She lay her head on his shoulder with a contented sigh.

"There, isn't this much better than the floor?" she whispered.

"....Yes," Obi Wan replied. He looked over at her and she looked up at him and smiled sweetly. She was so incredibly warm and soft against him, he found himself leaning into her slightly, wanting to be closer to her. As tired as he was, he felt his body starting to wake up. He began to laugh lightly. "Mandie, I don't think I'll be able to sleep like this."

"Why not?" she murmured.

Obi Wan sighed. "Because...this is not exactly lulling for me."

"Well, would you rather do something?"

"Like what?!" Obi Wan asked, startled by her casual tone.

She sat up slightly. "We could read to each other, or talk, or--"

"Oh," Obi Wan sighed in relief. "I thought you meant something else."

A knowing smile crept over Mandie's face. "We can if you want to."

Obi Wan stared at her stunned. "Do you want to?"

Mandie snuggled back down beside him. "If we didn't, would you be disappointed?"

Obi Wan hugged her to him and kissed the top of her head. "Well, would you?"

Mandie smiled. "Either way, I'll be happy. Either way, we are together. There's no rush. You told me we would see each other again and I truly believe that. If we don't do anything tonight, maybe next time our paths cross, we'll be ready to take that step in our relationship. So, don't worry about it. We've got all night to decide," she added softly.

Obi Wan looked over at her. "You little minx, you knew as well as I did Tia was not coming back here tonight."

Mandie laughed. "Of course she's not coming back tonight. I'll be lucky if I see her anytime before we get to Aurelia. You'll probably be spending quite a few nights in here."

Obi Wan rolled over on his side and gazed affectionately at her. He began running his fingers tenderly through her hair, brushing it back from her face.

"Just keep in mind, it may be a long time before we find ourselves at this point with someone again," he said with a sly smile.

Mandie licked her lips. "You're right. We really shouldn't let an opportunity like this pass us by."

Obi Wan pulled her to him, cradling her in his arms. "Either way, I'm happy too. More than anything, I just want to be with you. I can assure you, even if we decide not to take that step, after the time I've spent with you these last few days, I have enough to carry in my heart until our paths cross again."

Having said that, he softly kissed her .

END

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